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Seven Seas Entertainment

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POSTSCRIPT



Chapter 1: Behind the Curtain

The end-of-year special exam was one tense moment flowing into the next. Cameras filmed from multiple viewing angles while discussions among the participants unfolded over the monitors. There were one-on-one battles between representatives—battles where no one else was allowed to intervene. Even the homeroom instructors had been left in the dark about the exam's goals and warped rules up until the last moment. The students were trying their absolute hardest to stand tall on the stage of a battle that had been so suddenly thrust upon them.

Hoshinomiya Chie suppressed her frustration as she watched over the special exam with bated breath. She had only one wish: for her class to win. She clenched her teeth so hard that her jaw began to hurt, but she barely registered the pain. If there was something she could have done, she would have been willing to take any measures possible to win this special exam.

The rules for the End-of-Year that were "originally" planned to be implemented, which everyone had been notified of in advance, had allowed for some level of involvement, albeit small, from the teachers. However, once the day arrived and the truth was revealed, it turned out that a completely different exam was to be administered. They were never given a reason for this sudden change.

Hoshinomiya wasn't the only one surprised; none of the teachers involved in the second-year grade level had been informed either. However, it was now clear to them all what had happened. A foreign body—or rather, a bystander—sat enshrined before them. It appeared that the decision to have that bystander visit the school had resulted in all the plans being distorted.

"Why..." murmured Hoshinomiya in a small voice.

Her hopes vanished when Horikita Suzune was defeated. It all happened in an instant. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka appeared, resolute, and his words, actions, and merciless strategy were inconceivable from a student. Ichinose Honami hung her head sadly before him, and her defeat was made certain.

"This isn't fair..." she whispered.

No one heard her say those words, but she couldn't help but lament the presence of an unbeatable joker. She was reminded that there was no possibility of winning against the most powerful card that Chabashira had in her possession. All she could do was watch what unfolded over the screen, and the outcome of the match was heartlessly decided.

"This concludes the End-of-Year Special Exam. Thank you for your hard work, everyone," announced Chairman Sakayanagi, the person in charge of the school, calling out to everyone as though he were expressing his appreciation for their efforts and asking them for their feedback.

The visitor, who had witnessed the finale of the special exam along with the four homeroom instructors and a few people wearing black suits, slowly rose from the elegant chair where he had been sitting. Upon seeing the visitor stand up, several of the people in black suits who had been waiting on standby behind the visitor hurriedly made preparations to exit the room.

"Thank you very much for this, Chairman Sakayanagi," said the visitor. "I appreciate your efforts in arranging such a warm reception for me."

A very expensive-looking cup of coffee and a tray of beautiful tea cakes, the likes of which Hoshinomiya had never seen before, remained almost entirely untouched. Nevertheless, the visitor offered his hand to Sakayanagi to express his gratitude. Sakayanagi hurriedly took the visitor's hand in his own and bowed deeply.

"Oh, no, it was not a bother at all, Prime Minister Kijima," replied Sakayanagi. "Far from it. Rather, I am humbled and grateful that you have graced us with your presence. Thank you."

The current prime minister, the head of the cabinet: Kijima. As a proponent of the Advanced Nurturing High School, he had made a special visit to watch the special exam, and Hoshinomiya had no choice but to accept the situation. If the prime minister was visiting, then any accommodations or changes to the itinerary shouldn't have come as a surprise. Kijima directed his gaze at the monitors once more. On the other side of the screen, he saw Ayanokouji leaving the room, ignoring Ichinose, who was stunned into such a stupor that she couldn't even stand up by herself.

"It is incredibly unfortunate that he has gotten a student expelled, but we ought to respect his line of thinking, the idea that he should be free to use the rules as he chooses," said Kijima.

"If you could perhaps speak on that matter, sir, then it would be tremendously helpful for our institution as well," Sakayanagi said. "Ogiso-sensei, too, had firmly requested that we operate without the fear of the risk of expulsion, and—"

Kijima politely stopped Sakayanagi from speaking, just as he was about to ask for an explanation about the expulsion of students. The teachers exchanged looks, signaling with their eyes, understanding that 'Ogiso' referred to the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.

"I understand," said Kijima. "But, of course, there's no need to provide warmhearted guidance to a student that has been expelled, wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course. We will select several candidate institutions for an academic transfer which matches her personality and level of academic ability as soon as possible," said Sakayanagi.

"I see. I will leave you to it, then," said Kijima.

Kijima, after glancing at his wrist to check a watch that didn't look particularly expensive, turned his back to the others and made to leave. Sakayanagi hurriedly followed after him.

"I plan to visit you once again on the first of April, just as scheduled," said Kijima.

"Of course," Sakayanagi replied. "It sounds as though President Kouenji is looking forward to being able to meet you as well, Prime Minister Kijima."

"I am pleased to hear that. It has been three years since I've last seen him, so I'm looking forward to it as well," said Kijima.

Sakayanagi and Kijima exited the room as they spoke, taking the stifling pressure of the situation with them. The four homeroom teachers left behind let out a sigh of relief.

"Congrats, Sae-chan," said Hoshinomiya after a brief silence. "Now you're Class A, even if it's tentative for now."

"I'd like to say 'thank you,' but the exam's only just finished. Besides, there's also Maezono, who has just been expelled. I can't bring myself to celebrate this," Chabashira replied.

Did the expulsion of a single student outweigh the joy of being promoted to Class A? Chabashira's answer, and that serious look on her face to boot, rubbed Hoshinomiya the wrong way.

Honestly, she's probably making fun of me, since my class is continuing to fall further, thought Hoshinomiya. Or, perhaps...she doesn't even see me standing here in front of her at all in the first place. Every time this kind of frustration welled up within her, Hoshinomiya could feel the resentment building up throughout her body.

I will never, ever allow that woman to win.

I will not allow her to graduate from Class A.

Determination so strong that it was almost akin to murderous intent swelled within her, far more so than it had before the exam.

Chapter 2: Checking Each Answer

It was now dusk on March 14, just after the curtain had fallen on the End-of-Year Special Exam. The representatives from each class were sent back to their respective classes, still unable to process their feelings.

No, actually, it might have been the participants rather than the representatives who were unable to process their feelings. That was because they first had to get a grasp on the whole exam in order to get the full story. What happened behind the scenes, and how were things settled? They couldn't be satisfied with just a simple win or loss; they needed to know exactly what had unfolded.

On the way back to the classroom where the participants were waiting, it was obvious that Horikita and Yousuke had several suspicions and questions about the confrontation between me and Ichinose, but they continued walking in silence the whole way, probably because Chabashira-sensei was there as well. But it was none other than Chabashira-sensei who opened her mouth to speak first, perhaps she was unable to bear the silence.

"I'm only telling you this for your own reference," she said, "but this particular special exam was also unique compared to previous years. You, the representatives, and the participants who are already waiting in the classroom, were given different information, as a basic premise of the exam. Right now, the only things that both groups know are which class won, which class lost, and that there were students who have been expelled. That's it. I will not elaborate on these points in detail after we return to the classroom."

"About the real rules...that is, more precisely, the rules that were given to the representatives. There wouldn't be any problems with us explaining those rules to the participants ourselves now and resolving any discrepancies, is there?" asked Horikita.

Just before putting her hand on the door to the classroom, Chabashira-sensei turned around to face Horikita and Yousuke. "Of course not. It's up to you to decide what you ought to do. The plan is that you will be dismissed immediately after this, but you should discuss and resolve any issues that you are concerned about," she advised.

"Yes, I intend to do just that," said Horikita. "Besides, we representatives don't know the details regarding what kind of battles they had fought individually either. I think we need to share information."

They didn't know what each representative said or did. However, I expected that what they wanted most were the details of my battle with Ichinose. All they knew was the result: that Ichinose was defeated and that Maezono was driven to expulsion.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you'll give me a moment of your time today too, won't you?" asked Horikita.

"Of course. From the start, I had no intention of ending the day with any lingering doubts," I replied.

Horikita nodded, satisfied with my answer for the time being, and Yousuke nodded along.

Chabashira opened the door, and the four of us entered the classroom. The participants welcomed us back with various emotions on their face, including curiosity. Since our cell phones had now been returned to us after having been collected by the teachers, I turned mine on. Immediately, I received a message, which I skimmed lightly before putting my phone away in my pocket.

Chabashira-sensei carefully addressed the students, who were still visibly upset. "The End-of-Year Special Exam has ended in a victory for you. This means that you, Class 2-B will earn a large number of Class Points, and," Chabashira-sensei hesitated briefly, "I can say that it's almost a certainty that, when you become third-years next month, you will be promoted to Class A for the first time. However, as a result of this exam, Maezono is now facing expulsion. It's hard for me to come out and give you a big round of applause and say 'congratulations' to you considering everything that has occurred, but... At any rate, first and foremost, I still want to commend you on a battle well fought."

In a situation where there was no way she could burst with joy, Chabashira-sensei complimented the students on their efforts, while at the same time expressing her appreciation. However, there were very few looks of joy on the faces of my classmates at that moment. The feeling of winning or losing hadn't really settled in for them, and on top of that, Maezono would be expelled. Given the circumstances, someone would be met with frowns of disapproval if they openly got too excited. Moreover, the students couldn't help but want to know the details as soon as possible.

"Sensei, did Maezono really get expelled?" asked Sudou, coming out to say it directly while the other students hesitated.

"Well, that's half right," answered Chabashira-sensei. "While it is certainly true that Maezono is currently in the faculty lounge going through the expulsion process, if you can all scrounge together the Private Points you need right now, it is possible that her expulsion can be avoided."

Normally, it wouldn't have been strange for someone to have checked for confirmation at least once, but of course, Chabashira-sensei would know the total number of Private Points that the class had. It could be assumed that Chabashira-sensei had worded that the way that she did due to how unlikely it was that we could get the twenty million points in time. Even if she let Maezono have some fleeting hope, in the end, it would just be cruel. In fact, even if the class tried everything that they could to save her, there simply wasn't enough time to do so. They would need to collect the Private Points that they were short on from other classes or other grade levels right now, and that was next to impossible. Realistically, there was no way to prevent the expulsion. At this point, they had no choice but to accept it.

"If I wait, could I, um, see her?" asked Mii-chan anxiously.

The strong-willed Maezono and the weak-willed Mii-chan. At first glance, they would seem to be incompatible, but surprisingly, the two of them got along quite well and spent a lot of time together. It was only natural that Mii-chan would struggle to accept their sudden separation.

"Well...I'm not so sure about that," replied Chabashira-sensei.
"Not right now, at the very least. She's only just been handed down the expulsion just now, and she's extremely upset. Until that's resolved, it will be difficult."

Upon hearing the word *upset*, some of my classmates exchanged looks with mixed emotions.

"I'm sure there are a lot of things that bother you, but it's been

decided that I cannot give you the details. If you have any questions, you can discuss them afterward. That is all I have to report," announced Chabashira-sensei, quickly bringing the talk to an end in consideration of the students.

Horikita, having gotten permission from Chabashira-sensei, quickly went over to stand at the podium.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to ask all of you to stay here for a moment longer," announced Horikita.

"D'ya mean you're gonna, like, tell us about what happened with Maezono-san getting expelled and all that?" asked Nishimura, sounding frustrated at having had to wait for the opportunity.

"Yes," replied Horikita. "I've decided that I couldn't just let these incomprehensible parts of the End-of-Year Special Exam go unaddressed. But I can't resolve everything all by myself. I'm asking all of you to help me with this."

Maezono ended up being removed from this class.

It was the price of victory.

A battle that was unclear, the details not understood.

It wouldn't have been strange for at least someone like Kouenji to have gotten up from his seat and left, but there was no sign of that happening. When I shifted my gaze over to check what he was looking at, I saw that he was staring at himself in his hand mirror. Either he was not at all interested in the details of the exam, or he was just so absorbed in his own reflection in the mirror that he couldn't even hear what the teacher or Horikita was saying. I couldn't make a judgment either way, but it seemed certain that he would stay put for a while.

"First and foremost, I'd like to address what points that I imagine are bothering everyone, myself included," said Horikita.

She then started explaining how to eliminate any discrepancies between the representatives and the participants. What things did each side know? What things did each side not know? What were the rules for determining winners and rules? And so on and so forth.

Yousuke himself came out and honestly told everyone how his method of fighting didn't go well, while Horikita recalled that although she had done very well, getting consecutive victories, she suffered a complete and total defeat at the hands of Ichinose, the opposing general —Horikita hadn't stood a chance against her.

Then everyone's attention began to focus on what happened after that. Namely, the fact that I, the general, had completely shut down Ichinose, whom Horikita described as a powerful opponent. They also discussed the fact that it was decided Maezono would be expelled in the process, which was something even the representatives Horikita and Yousuke didn't know the particulars about. The matter of Maezono simply couldn't be avoided.

"While the students who were assigned the role of traitor certainly faced the risk of expulsion, if they had a good grasp on the rules, then that risk was almost zero. I thought that Maezono-san and Ayanokouji-kun would've both understood that as well, but..." said Horikita, trailing off.

When Horikita said my name, most of my classmates turned their eyes toward me, and I got up from my seat. I decided to move closer to Horikita, to explain things to everyone. Chabashira-sensei could have left, but it seemed she was intending to stay and watch the discussion unfold.

"First of all, I would like to apologize for the sudden expulsion of one of our classmates," I said as I bowed my head. Even now, it was important to observe the proper procedures and say the right things. "The traitor position came with both risks and rewards. If you were determined to be the traitor, you would be expelled, but if you weren't determined to be the traitor, you could receive either five million Private Points or fifty Class Points. Whatever Maezono was planning to choose doesn't matter, although you're certainly free to speculate on your own. However, in addition to that particular aspect, the longer the traitor remained in the game, the more information they would give to the opposing class as a result. So, getting the traitor to confess and handling the matter quickly was definitely an option to win, with a frontal attack."

That was something that Horikita and Yousuke thought about right from the start, as soon as they became representatives. The participants also likely found it easy to imagine that the traitor would confess right away, since they were standing in the same shoes.

"I imagine that Horikita would know this well, as she had fought Ichinose directly as a representative, but Ichinose was an opponent of unimaginable strength in this particular special exam. Can I assume that we all share that same understanding?" I asked.

"Yes, she was strong," Horikita replied. "So strong that I couldn't visualize winning at all."

"It was the same for me," I said, nodding in response to Horikita's declaration of potential defeat. "Up until I faced her, I thought that I could manage somehow, but I immediately had a gut feeling once the one-on-one battle actually began. For Ichinose, this exam was an arena where she could best demonstrate her abilities, and she's someone who knows both her enemies and allies very well. She also has a level of insight that lets her see through truth and lies, leaving things bare."

At my side, Horikita nodded with her eyes closed. She was likely remembering her own battle with Ichinose.

"I didn't stand a chance of winning with a fair, frontal assault. Even so, since I had been entrusted with the role of general, I had to think of what I could do in order to win. After desperately racking my brain in the limited time I was given, I came up with just one way to win." I stopped speaking for a moment at this point, letting everyone really chew on my words before I resumed my explanation.

"The only way to win was to get the traitor expelled at an early stage," I declared.

Of course, there was no way that would be enough information to soothe everyone's concerns. It was only natural that they'd be confused as to what I was talking about.

"What do you mean by that? How does getting Maezono—I mean, how does getting the traitor expelled lead to winning?" Horikita asked.

"Even if I tried fighting her fairly," I answered, "I couldn't possibly beat Ichinose with my abilities. I thought that the only way to win against such an opponent was to launch a surprise attack, hitting her with something unexpected. At an early stage, I proposed that we negotiate, and I suggested to Ichinose that we each use up our traitor rights, mutually. If both parties lost their traitor rights, no handicap would be created, and no one would be expelled. That would've been a welcome turn of events for Ichinose, who thought that we were going to fight head-on, fairly."

Of all of us, Ichinose hated the thought of sacrificing her friends more than anyone else. Actually, more precisely, she didn't welcome the idea of anyone getting expelled from school. That was something everyone in our grade level agreed on, and it didn't even warrant explanation.

"My intention was to use our traitor rights to make Ichinose party to the expulsion, so that she'd also be responsible for it. That was the only way that I could think of," I concluded.

At that point, the classroom briefly erupted into noise. There were some who understood my explanation, some who could not understand, and some who fell into both categories. Only Chabashira-sensei, who was watching things objectively, remained calm.

"Yes, I suppose it certainly would've been easy to come to an arrangement if your opponent was Ichinose-san, and then it would mean that she would be indirectly complicit in Maezono-san's expulsion as well... So that was your aim..."

Having been a representative, Horikita was naturally quicker when it came to imagining the scenario than the participants.

"Ichinose, being faced with the reality that she had unwittingly played a part in Maezono's expulsion, was greatly, incredibly upset. Coupled with the strong feelings of guilt she was going through, she was subsequently unable to make use of her full skill set and could no longer make satisfactory nominations," I replied, illustrating the result of my actions.

"W-wait. Please hold on just a second," stammered Yousuke. He must not have been able to let this stand, because he shot up quickly. "I was allowed to fight as a representative too. I know that I wasn't useful, and I know that I'm not exactly qualified to complain or raise an objection. Even so, I have to wonder, was it really worth sacrificing our classmate? Even if it were a situation where we would've had a 100 percent chance of winning by expelling Maezono-san, I still couldn't honestly agree with that. Not to mention, what if you had lost in this situation? Don't you think that there was a strong possibility that something like that could've happened? Regardless of being a representative or not, I think that methods like that are almost an abuse of authority."

Some of the students seemed to agree.

"Yeah, that's definitely true," muttered Ichihashi. "I'm sure that, given Ichinose's personality, she would be upset if she found out that

she helped in getting Maezono-san expelled, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you would definitely win because of it...right?"

"Yes. If you were to say that it's just a hindsight-based opinion, then yes, that's all it is. However, would you rather that we have lost by just blindly flailing about, with no plan at all?" I argued. "Or would you prefer that we bet on the possibility of winning, even if it called for sacrifices? After weighing my options and thinking about which was the right call, I decided to choose the latter as a representative of the class and as the general. It was because I thought that a defeat there could've been fatal for us. Supposing if, hypothetically, Class A had won as speculated, and our class had lost, then that would mean there'd be a gap of three hundred Class Points. There was no guarantee that we'd definitely be able to turn things around and recover from that in just another year. Of course, you could say that for basically every exam, but out of all of them, this exam in particular was a battle that we absolutely couldn't afford to lose."

While some of the reasoning was a lie, there wasn't any deception about the sequence of events that had led up to Maezono's expulsion from school. Should you lose without making any sacrifices, or should you go for the win even if you have to sacrifice someone? Fundamentally, it was impossible for anyone to give a perfect answer to that question. However, it really was true that if they'd lost, they'd have lost almost all progress on the road to Class A, and that truth backed up my story.

"I'm not trying to justify my actions here, but I am willing to submit to a majority vote. I don't believe there are many people here who feel that it would've been better to lose the exam rather than sacrifice Maezono," I added.

The classroom fell completely silent. Some students exchanged looks, others averted their eyes. I could see that they didn't want to do something like take a vote, that much was clear. However, Horikita likely wasn't going to ask for one here. It would only wound everyone emotionally. While it was a painful reality, the fact that this class had won was a bigger deal than they could have imagined.

A world where Sakayanagi had won, and Horikita had lost. One couldn't help but mentally calculate how vital it was to avoid that result. Also, the fact that I wasn't the one who had been sacrificed in this situation was something that couldn't be ignored either. To deny

that would force us to reevaluate our thinking about Sakura's sacrifice. Even so, if there was someone who could deny that right now.

"Even so, I think that it was arrogant, no matter what anyone says," argued Yousuke. "This was not a decision that you should've made by yourself, Ayanokouji-kun. No representative had the right to sacrifice Maezono-san for something like that."

Yes, such a challenge could only come from a student like Yousuke, who looked out for others more than himself. I had already expected that an objection like this would come up.

"I suppose you're right," I replied, "but since I was in a situation where I couldn't talk to anyone, I had no choice but to decide on my own. Also, to put it one way, I didn't think through it in the same way you would, Yousuke. Since I was entrusted with the fate of the class, I thought that my first priority was to bring us victory."

I confronted Yousuke, who had argued against me, meeting him head-on with my own logic.

"B-but...when you think about Maezono-san, who was chosen at random, then—"

"Sorry, but there was a good reason why it was Maezono," I declared, cutting him off.

Why Maezono? Eventually, students would have come forward to complain about that point, which was why I took the initiative here and interrupted Yousuke to explain.

"If I had chosen which of my classmates to sacrifice solely on the basis of like or dislike, it would've left me dissatisfied and anxious. It wasn't as though I had chosen Maezono at random, as far as I'm concerned," I explained.

"So you're saying that you have a convincing reason for it?" asked Horikita, who had picked up on what I was trying to say and was clearly trying to stay calm.

"Why did I choose Maezono as the person to be expelled, you ask? Well, that's because..."

I proceeded to impart the essential information to the class, that Maezono had spread information about us to the other classes. Namely, I said that Maezono had been the one who leaked the fact that I was going to be the general for our class in the End-of-Year Special Exam.

"If I remember correctly, Horikita-san did tell everyone to keep it totally confidential, right?" asked Ichihashi, speaking up as he thought back to earlier conversations, even though he had joined the side refuting me.

"That's right. That was something that I had asked Horikita to do, originally. One of the reasons that I took on the role of general was that we were trying to go for the element of surprise. If our opponents assumed that Horikita would've been the one appearing as the general, then they would've been jumping at shadows, suspicious over something that wasn't there right up until my ambush. We thought that, as a result, we could've thrown Ichinose and the other representatives from her class off their game. If such a plan had succeeded, we might have been able to win without getting anyone expelled. However, not even on the day of the exam but a day prior, there were some students in Ichinose's class who already knew that I would be acting as the general," I explained.

"Meaning, in other words, that information had been leaked early on. You're sure that it was Maezono-san who did it?" asked Horikita.

"I'm sure," I replied. "I had told you that I absolutely did not want the fact I was going to be the general getting out, because it was information and strategy that was directly related to whether we'd win or lose. When I knew that it had been leaked to the other classes, I proceeded to investigate."

At this point, Sudou, who must have had some questions of his own, raised his hand and began speaking from his seat.

"So does that mean you've got some proof that Maezono's the one who leaked the info?" he asked. "If so, then where'd ya get your hands on that kind of evidence? I mean, I can't imagine that Maezono'd let herself get found out that easily."

I welcomed this question from Sudou, who had been properly listening and understanding my story.

"To explain that," I began, "I first need to tell you why Maezono leaked the information about our class. This is because I'm sure it's difficult to imagine that she would just hand information over to another class for no reason."

Sudou and the other students who were listening intently nodded their heads.

"Who here knew that Maezono and Hashimoto were dating?" I asked.

For the moment, I skipped over a detailed explanation and instead asked that question. The majority of the students exchanged looks of surprise, and I could understand from just a glance that most of them hadn't known about it. However, as I expected, there were a few in the know. The ones who immediately raised their hands were Kushida and Matsushita, then Mii-chan followed suit and quietly raised her hand in a mild-mannered fashion.

Three people in total. As for Kushida, all I could say is that I expected nothing less from her. Even though her true nature had been exposed and she was cut off from the rest of the class, she still proved to be skilled at gathering intelligence. Matsushita, on the other hand, may have found out about the relationship between Maezono and Hashimoto from the way I had been investigating Maezono before the exam. And with Mii-chan, since she was a close friend of hers, I figured that Maezono had likely confided to her in secret.

"Hashimoto's character is something well known by all, and he places great importance on gathering information, including from his own class," I explained. "By dating Maezono, he was intentionally extracting information from this class."

"So you're suggesting that she had been asked by her boyfriend, then," concluded Horikita.

"I suspect that Hashimoto had been taking advantage of their relationship from the very beginning," I replied.

That truth would likely be hurtful if Maezono or anyone close to her found out about it. However, the more one knew about Hashimoto Masayoshi, the more likely that seemed. And to make my point even more convincing here, I turned my attention to Sudou, who had asked me the question earlier.

"Sudou, you and some other people had met up with Maezono to talk about me, didn't you?" I asked.

Sudou cocked his head to the side at my question, as if he couldn't immediately recall whether it had happened. However, when I continued and said the names of the people who were there and when the meeting happened, he apparently gradually began to remember.

"Y-yeah," replied Sudou. "That did happen. Actually, dang, I'm

shocked you know so much 'bout it."

I didn't know what happened when they gathered, nor did I know the contents of their conversation, but if I was the main topic of discussion, then it wouldn't have been surprising if there was some minor gag order on it. That was exactly why he was surprised that I knew about it.

"I found out that the meeting wasn't Maezono's idea either, but rather something that Hashimoto had instructed her to do behind the scenes," I explained.

Sudou was at a loss for words as he thought over past events, but a perplexed Ike spoke up.

"Wait, hold up. How do you know about that, Ayanokouji? It was s'posed to be secret," he said.

I was well aware that this topic would raise such questions. If possible, it would've been ideal for someone who had been present at the meeting to voluntarily make a move here and answer, rather than having the answer come from me.

"That's because I told him," Matsushita raised her hand and came forward as a witness without hesitation. "What Ayanokouji-kun says is true. There's no doubt about it."

Her assessment of the situation was spot-on, and her timing was impeccable. Though less than half of the class may have been convinced after all of that, it had shut down their arguments. This was good enough as rationalization for having Maezono expelled. It wasn't necessary to convince all the students; I could just convince some of them, to a certain extent, and leave the rest with a feeling of distrust. If I were to express it in terms that were easy to understand, I'd say that it was best to leave it around fifty-fifty. I figured that would work out better for the class later.

"Well, I guess that I'm more or less convinced with that, but I dunno, man. It's still kinda...y'know..." said Sudou.

Although Sudou's words said that he was convinced, it looked as though he still found the story hard to swallow, probably because he had a slightly different perspective from the other students. Sudou pushed back his chair, stood up, and then put those thoughts into words.

"I get that you did everything you possibly could so that our class would win," he said. "And I get that your original plan didn't work out 'cause Maezono leaked it, and Ichinose ended up being stronger than you thought she'd be, so you went into the fight prepared to hurt even your allies if necessary. But was there really no way other than getting Maezono expelled, dude? Well, it's like, I mean... How do I put this? It's just that, knowing you, Ayanokouji, I figured that you could have come up with a way to win the fight without there being any casualties."

Sudou had seen some of my abilities, and based on that, he seemed to have a gut feeling that I could've come up with a better way. His point of view, that I could've won even if Maezono hadn't entered the equation, wasn't necessarily untrue. His reading of the situation was correct, although only partially true. Although it would have lowered the probability of success, it wasn't impossible for me to have won without getting someone expelled. I had thought about being deliberately vague on that topic and dodging the question, but Horikita standing beside me acted on that before I did.

"Ayanokouji-kun is a talented person, worthy of being entrusted with the position of general," said Horikita. "However, it is also true that our opponent was someone strong. I can vouch for that, having directly fought her myself. I honestly couldn't even compete with Ichinose-san at all, and I was made to realize right away that I couldn't win. Right before Ayanokouji-kun and I switched places, I was sure that even Ayanokouji-kun would lose. I had been defeated so thoroughly that I couldn't even believe that my fellow comrade could win."

Horikita, as the class leader, had naturally taken on the challenge with extraordinary determination. It was precisely because of the pressure that Horikita was under, a pressure that had easily broken Horikita's will, that her words had the power to convince people even without going into detail.

"I see. So you're sayin' that Ichinose was that strong, then," replied Sudou.

Ichinose didn't give off an impression of being strong or scary, which was very likely why our classmates couldn't conjure up such an image of her, but Horikita's honest report had convinced many of them.

"I'm going to say something here," Horikita declared. "I had drawn this conclusion precisely because I had witnessed our opponent's strength: We cannot blame Ayanokouji-kun for his choice. In fact, even now I think that he made not only the best choice, but that it was the only choice available, given the results. It was a necessary choice for this class to have won."

Horikita was answering from the position she had been trusted with, that of class leader. Of course, she couldn't sincerely be happy about it, since it was also Horikita's role to do what she could in order to prevent expulsions from happening. However, even though she felt that pain, she had accepted it as a necessary measure. No, actually, it was a situation where she had no choice but to accept. No matter what she said, she would not be able to get Maezono to return to this school. Since that was the case, she felt that she needed to think positively, not negatively.

"Okay, I understand," replied Sudou after thinking it over. "If none other than the class leader herself says so, then I can't argue. In fact, it sounds like Ayanokouji was determined to fight for the sake of the class, even if it meant the rest of us'd resent him for it."

Nodding his head to show that he was properly convinced, Sudou sat back down in the chair that he had pulled out. A somewhat surprising question arose from Sudou and Horikita's answers: Did the situation end up around fifty-fifty, as I had intended? Well, perhaps it had ended up leaning slightly more toward people being convinced? It seemed like there were no more of the criticisms I had expected. I had wondered if it might be necessary for me to add some fuel to the dying fire, but as time went on, one of the students quietly let slip a few words.

"But, um, well..." mumbled Azuma, "But it's just that a total of three people have been expelled from our class. Yamauchi-kun, Sakurasan, and now Maezono-san, and, well, Ayanokouji-kun had something to do with all of them..."

"And what exactly is your intention with that statement?" countered Matsushita, though with a gentle tone.

"Well, I don't know about 'intention' or whatever. It's just like, it seems to be a little too much to call it coincidence, or like, you know..." stammered Azuma.

Her words were noncommittal, but the point she was trying to make was still clear: Was it really just a coincidence?

"Are you saying that Ayanokouji has been purposefully getting

people expelled?" Sudou fired back at her, taking my side.

"She didn't say anything like that," Mori jumped in. "She wasn't going that far. But it's just, like, how do we know that one of us won't get sacrificed next?"

Mori must have been harboring some distrust as well, as she spoke up in Azuma's defense. I had wanted people to express their opinions so that I could refute them, but so far both their voices and reasons were a little weak, which seemed to have resulted in a bottleneck.

"I don't know if I have the right to speak up, but is it okay if I say something?" asked Kushida.

Just then, Kushida made a statement, speaking in such a way that it was hard to judge whether she was an angel or a devil.

"I think that Azuma-san and some others are saying something like Ayanokouji-kun might be intentionally getting people expelled, but I don't think it's true," she said. "For example, with Sakura-san's expulsion, that originated from my relationship with Horikita-san, since there's antagonism between us, and it was me taking a shot at the class that ended with Sakura-san getting expelled. That was it. If I had just honestly taken part in the Unanimous Special Exam, then no one would have been expelled. If Ayanokouji-kun hadn't acted, we wouldn't have been able to clear the exam and we would've had Class Points taken away. Basically, he took care of dealing with the aftermath, a job that no one wanted to do. Yamauchi-kun's betrayal was a similar story, and it sounds like Maezono had her share of problematic behavior as well. So, given that, Ayanokouji-kun took the initiative and acted in such a way that he could minimize the damage in a situation where he had to win, even though he had to sacrifice somebody. Don't you think that we should be looking at this in a better light?"

Kushida also explained to Azuma and Mori that all of those measures were necessary actions in order to save the class. Also, while she was speaking on the consequences of the chaos she herself had caused, Kushida's words carried weight because she was the person responsible. That, along with Kushida and Matsushita's show of support for me, caused Azuma and others to back down, albeit begrudgingly. At that moment, one of the boys in class who had pulled out his chair got up from his seat and put his hand on the classroom door.

"Where are you going, Kouenji?" snapped Sudou, as the first to notice something odd happening.

"Where, you ask? I would think it is about time to be leaving for the day, of course," replied Kouenji.

"The discussion ain't over yet, dude," said Sudou.

"I was simply killing time before meeting up with a certain lady," Kouenji replied. "I do not want to be late for my date, so if you'll please excuse me."

Kouenji had been looking at himself in his mirror and fiddling with his phone, so it seemed as though he wasn't waiting around to see how the discussion went, but rather because he had nowhere else to be until now. Truthfully, since Chabashira-sensei had already brought homeroom to an end, there wasn't any problem with him leaving anyway.

"You're as selfish as ever. You know that this is an important discussion," argued Sudou.

"Important?" Kouenji scoffed. "I haven't the foggiest idea why any of this is important."

With that, Kouenji casually brushed off Sudou and exited the classroom. The room's atmosphere had soured, but that was likely precisely why Chabashira-sensei felt that now was the time to interject, because she returned to the podium.

"Well, all that aside, perhaps we should call it a day here," said Chabashira-sensei, seemingly thinking that she should break up the meeting instead of leaving it to us students to decide on our own.

"I agree," said Horikita. "Unless there's anyone who really wants to continue this discussion, let's end it here for the time being."

Even Yousuke didn't object, despite his having watched the proceedings with a tightened expression. Although he was dissatisfied, he probably agreed that we ought to stop here.

Incidentally, the Class Point totals after the exam are probably as follows:

TENTATIVE CLASS POINT VALUES AS OF THE END OF THE END-OF-YEAR SPECIAL EXAM:

Horikita's Class: 1233 Points

Sakayanagi's Class: 1093 Points

Ryuuen's Class: 1040-1090 Points

Ichinose's Class: 714 Points

Our class had pulled slightly ahead and would be promoted to Class A, with Sakayanagi's class closing in on us, and Ryuuen's class in hot pursuit of them. Only Ichinose's class was left far behind.

Those were the Class Point values at this point in time, but what came next was important. It was almost certain that Sakayanagi's class would be penalized once she left the school. So far, none of the students in our grade had voluntarily chosen to leave the school, so there was no way to know how that would unfold. However, I had recently taken a look at past cases and found out there have been instances where students had been dealt penalties of 300 Class Points, as I had initially predicted. In other words, if Sakayanagi's class were to receive the same kind of penalty as seen in the past, then they might fall all the way to third place instantly, with a total of 793 Class Points. Which meant that the possibility of moving things to a situation where there were two strong classes and two weak classes has increased. With the spring vacation before us, it would seem that there would be plenty to do, even more than anticipated.

2.1

ALL OF THE STUDENTS had disappeared from the classroom after dismissal. It seemed like Kei had wanted to head back to the dorms with me, but after I told her that it'd be better for her to head back with Satou and the others, she picked up on the situation and immediately backed down. I alone was the cause of Maezono's expulsion from school, and if Kei were to be seen with me as my girlfriend immediately following that expulsion, then the negative impression that others had of me would include her as well. In order to avoid something like that, the safest choice was for me to head on back by myself, at least for today. Even Horikita and Yousuke, who knew the details of what happened better than anyone else and likely wanted to discuss those details more deeply than anyone else, didn't stay in the classroom for

too long because they understood this.

"Well, then, I guess I'll head on back too," I thought aloud.

With that thought in mind, I was the last person to leave the classroom. I started to head straight back to the dormitory, but—

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun," Kushida called out to me just as I exited the main entrance. It seemed like she had been waiting for me, given that no one else was around. "I just wanted to ask you something."

"It'd probably be better for you to just ask over the phone, though," I replied.

"You think someone might see us and start spreading bad rumors?" said Kushida, apparently fully anticipating that possibility.

"Well, if you don't mind, then I guess we can talk about it right here and now."

"I don't have any intention of trying to curry favor with anyone in class at this point in the game. Besides, it would make more sense to come out and ask you directly, anyway."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I wanna ask about that thing with Azuma earlier. What I mean is, since you were in front of your classmates, you rounded up support from people, including me, and ended things amicably. Still, the truth is that you really did get Maezono expelled on purpose, didn't you? It was a chance to make a traitor disappear."

"Well, that was—"

When I tried to deny it, even if it was just for appearances on the surface, I noticed that the corners of Kushida's mouth curved up slightly, and she smiled ever so faintly as she continued making her point.

"It is true that Ichinose was particularly strong in this exam, but even so, you could have used other means to hurt her and push her into a corner. Am I wrong, Ayanokouji-kun?"

The phrasing that Kushida used, "other means to hurt her and push her into a corner," rather than expressing that I could have won on sheer merit, was a brilliant observation on her part.

"It's because our dumb classmates and that goody two-shoes Horikita think about things in ways that are convenient for them, so they probably wouldn't see that," she added.

That could be said to be Kushida's skill—that she was always trying to find out what other people were really thinking, deep down in their heart of hearts.

"Besides, even if we had lost, getting rid of Maezono would have been an upside for you. I'm right, aren't I?" asked Kushida.

Kushida went so far as to suggest that I wouldn't view it as such a terrible thing even if we lost if it was a trade for getting rid of Maezono, while everyone else would see Maezono's expulsion as icing on the loser cake.

"Honestly, I'm extremely impressed by that. By that kind of attitude, I mean," said Kushida.

"What makes you think that way?" I asked.

"Because you're the one who pushed me into a position where I could have been expelled, Ayanokouji-kun. It'd be strange if I didn't think that much of it."

She didn't go into any detail, simply stating the biggest reason. I was honestly impressed, myself. But despite that, I shouldn't make any declarations here.

"I did what was necessary in order to win, because I was up against a powerful opponent," I answered.

"Hmm?" replied Kushida knowingly.

While she understood that I was answering evasively, she didn't try to press the issue.

"All that aside, I was impressed with the way you handled yourself back there, Kushida. That was a flawless intervention. Even though everyone was wary of you, many of the students recognized the accuracy of what you said," I remarked.

That was probably because what happened during the Unanimous Special Exam had left such an enormous impact on everyone, including Kushida.

"Well, of course," Kushida replied. "I lost a lot, and I need to recover as much as possible and reestablish a safe and secure position for myself within the class. I mean, there's no telling what'll happen the next time I fall into your hands, Ayanokouji-kun."

She was trying to position herself so that she wouldn't be targeted for expulsion. Even if it was for her own sake, that was no problem as far as I was concerned. If that motivated her, then it was a good thing.

"Horikita seems to trust you too, Kushida."

"Stop that. Horikita and I are mutual enemies, but since we have the same goals, we have a truce. That's all."

I was sure that Kushida would continue to handle herself well within the class in the future. Although I couldn't see how she felt on the inside, in that moment, I felt confident of that much.

2.2

Now, LET US STEP BACK in time just a little bit, to around the time when Horikita and the others began discussing Maezono's expulsion. In another room, students in Ichinose's class were also about to begin a post-exam meeting to discuss the End-of-Year Special Exam. They had been on the very brink even before the exam had begun, and they absolutely needed to have won.

All three representatives returned alongside Hoshinomiya and headed back to their seats, barely speaking a word. In the silent classroom, Ichinose hung her head low and couldn't bring herself to look up. However, if she didn't explain herself, then she would remain trapped, frozen in this moment in time.

"Everyone...I'm so sorry," croaked Ichinose sadly, practically having to squeeze the words from her throat. "We lost the exam today, and it's because of me..."

Neither the participants nor even the other representatives were aware of any of the details of what happened during the special exam. The battles between representatives were private. They could only glean what happened from the results and from how the representatives reacted. It was true not just for Horikita's class, but for Ichinose's class as well.

The expulsion of one of their students should have been a painful experience, but even so, the other class had seized victory. You could

say that Horikita's class had enough strength to face forward and carry on. Meanwhile, things were quite different in Ichinose's class. Only the reality of defeat was weighing heavily on them, nothing else.

Or rather, that's how it should have been. The students of this class tended to reject such a negative atmosphere, but in this case, that only meant that they would continue to wallow in lukewarm hope.

"There's nothing for you to apologize for, Honami-chan," said one student.

"I think that it would've gone better if we could've handled the discussions better and helped more on our end," added another.

Ichinose seemed to have been expecting blame, yet she received nothing but consolations.

"Yeah, that's right," said another. "There's nothing to worry about at all."

There was no need to challenge anyone about who said what on this occasion. It wasn't just one person, either. Similar expressions of support came one after another, as though it were a matter of course. That's right, this wasn't uncommon. It could be said that this was the usual way of things here. Everyone encouraged each other during sad times, and they all acted cheerful during tough times. They never, ever targeted or hounded a particular person.

Of course, that sort of positive thinking wasn't wrong, per se. It was just that what was happening in front of Himeno's eyes was the familiar, ever-unchanging sight of people licking each other's wounds. Himeno watched this scene unfold in her class with a frustration that was hard for her to come out and talk about. We can't go on like this was the only thought running through her head, unable to make it to her mouth.

Of course, she knew that it wasn't just Ichinose's fault that they had lost. As the other students said, they could've done more as participants themselves, and Himeno herself knew that she hadn't exactly delivered praiseworthy results.

But still, there won't be any progress if we keep pretending not to see the results, Himeno thought to herself. That was why she wanted to raise an objection and get everyone to stop and think. She was determined not to let this defeat end just as a defeat, but to have the class take it as a lesson that would lead to what came next.

However, her words didn't come. They got up to her throat, but she ended up swallowing them back down. To begin with, she wasn't naturally the kind of student who was particularly good at coming forward, whether she liked it or not. It wasn't easy for her to talk herself into it with something like "Okay, just be brave for now and do it." She was nervous. Her palms gradually started getting slick with sweat. Her lips seemed stuck together and wouldn't separate. The back of her throat was dry.

Her vision was swimming, and her head started to hurt. It was the same thing that always happened, and she yet again felt the frustration of not being able to communicate her thoughts in front of a large group of people. However, Himeno was beginning to change. Previously, she had been alone, but now there was a student near who understood her. So Himeno looked at Kanzaki as though she were asking him for help.

A small group of students had come together with the mindset that they would create a system allowing people to voice their opinions to Ichinose. Just getting the conversation started with a few words would be fine. If Kanzaki spurred her on right here and now, she could speak up with the small amount of resolve she had gathered. She had changed that much.

However, Kanzaki didn't even demonstrate a willingness to look up, let alone look around the room. It seemed like he intended to wait for this moment to end with his head hung low, without even budging an inch. Himeno glanced over at her other ally, Hamaguchi, with an imploring look. Hamaguchi immediately noticed Himeno looking at him, but he shook his head slightly left and right, perplexed. His action seemed to tell her, "As long as Kanzaki isn't making a move, now is not the time." And so, Himeno didn't get the push that she wanted, and all that moved forward was time.

"Look," said Shibata. "Yeah, we might be in a little bit of a pickle now, everybody. But hey, it's not over yet."

Shibata, thinking that Ichinose was trying to shoulder all the responsibility on her own and needed encouragement, stood up from his seat and approached her side, then gave the class a big fist pump.

"We lost this time, but we still have one more year," he raised his voice to a shout as he looked around the classroom, trying to liven everyone up. "Isn't that right, everybody?!"

Despite Himeno's feelings, reality was cruel. She buried her

thoughts, pushing them aside as she tried to match the attitudes of her classmates, who were offering encouragement and saying they could still fight. It was a cycle of conformity bias, and it filled the classroom. Yet the person who looked at these classmates with the coldest, most composed eyes of anyone in the room was their homeroom instructor, Hoshinomiya.

Even though Hoshinomiya had at times been so repulsed that she wanted to vomit, she stifled that urge, just barely managing to grin and bear it. According to the school's regulations, unnecessary intervention as a teacher was to be avoided. It wasn't like she had fully intended on consciously abiding by that directive in the first place, but she had reached the absolute limits of her patience. Hoshinomiya opened the palm of her hand, raised it up high, and then slammed it down forcefully on the lectern. The atmosphere, which had gradually begun to regain its liveliness little by little, instantly froze over once again.

"Everyone. Do you really understand the situation here?" Hoshinomiya asked in a detached, matter-of-fact tone, as her students were licking each other's wounds. "I'm going to put this bluntly: You are all acting crazy. Just insane."

The students, who had been trying to put on a smile, even if it was a forced one, now wore stiff expressions.

"Ch-Chie-chan?"

One of the boys in the class called her first name, perhaps feeling uneasy at the fact that the one to send a chill through the room was their teacher. However, she ignored that and glared at Shibata, who was standing next to Ichinose.

"Shibata-kun. Earlier, you said, 'It's not over yet.' Didn't you?" asked Hoshinomiya.

"Uh, I, yes?" he stammered.

"Do you seriously believe that?" she asked.

"Well, I mean, yeah," he answered. "Because it's too early to give up. Right? If we put it in soccer terms, sure, we might be behind in this situation, but if it's just two or three points, as long as we can get control of the ball one more time and really get in there by the net, then ___"

"Two, three points? Control of the ball? Don't be ridiculous," said

Hoshinomiya. "This loss is excruciating."

"Well, but, Sensei, we still have a whole year, and—"

"We have a whole year?" she cut him off. "You're wrong. Don't you get it? You *only* have one more year left."

"We definitely have a chance to turn things around th—"

"You don't. I'll give you a soccer analogy, since you seem to love that," Hoshinomiya kept going, unable to bear her pupils refusing to look at reality. "Far from taking back those two points and getting two goals, if anything, your opponents scored about three more points on you this time. Now, ultimately, you're down by about ten points, and you're losing. And, on top of that, your opponents are a better team than you are. You need to get that through your head."

But Shibata refused to back down.

"Sensei, have you ever heard of David and Goliath? Knowing us, we—"

"Stop it," she interrupted again. "What you need to do is accept the hard facts, not chatter about silly fantasies."

She had to do this, to drag her lost and wandering students back to reality. Shibata, who was about to say something back, had no choice but to swallow his words, as he had never heard Hoshinomiya raise her voice in such a frightening way before. After being instructed to return to his seat, Shibata reluctantly left Ichinose's side with hunched shoulders. Then Hoshinomiya approached the downcast Ichinose.

"We're already finished. Isn't that right, Ichinose-san?" asked Hoshinomiya.

"Sensei..." Ichinose muttered.

Hoshinomiya, who had been watching the exam, understood the situation well. She knew that Ayanokouji had completely devastated Ichinose, who had been deeply wounded emotionally. Even so, she had to make Ichinose accept it. She had to make her accept that her class no longer had any chance of winning.

"It's my fault. My suitability for continuing to lead the class from here on out is—"

Ichinose was just about to demonstrate a willingness to step down from her own position. However, Hoshinomiya didn't allow her to finish speaking.

"No, that's not it," said Hoshinomiya, interrupting her.

"Huh?" blinked Ichinose.

"I'm not asking for such defeatist attitudes. I just want you to see reality. That's all," said Hoshinomiya. She had seemed angry up until just moments before, but now wore a kind, gentle smile. "You understand, right? How we're losing right now and how, if things keep up like this, we won't win in the future either."

"Yes..." replied Ichinose, meekly.

After having a sound argument drilled into her and forced to take a hard look at their predicament, Ichinose had no other choice but to affirm what her teacher said, even if she didn't want to. Hoshinomiya gave a satisfied nod at Ichinose's response.

"It's okay, Ichinose-san. I believe in your abilities. You can just leave all the uncertain parts to your teacher," said Hoshinomiya, murmuring against Ichinose's ear while gently patting her on the back.

If she accepted Ichinose stepping down right here and now, then the class would become much more difficult to manage. She had decided that first, it was important to postpone that abdication.

"So, for now, you just take it slow and give yourself some emotional self-care. Okay?" advised Hoshinomiya.

After saying that, Hoshinomiya walked away from Ichinose, and her usual demeanor returned. At this rate, if she left everything in the hands of the students, they wouldn't be able to escape from the lowest tier: Class D. She had no choice but to step in and take matters into her own hands to save the class, regardless of the school policies. Therefore, at this moment, all that Hoshinomiya wanted from Ichinose was for her not to send the class into a panic.

"Okay, that's enough for this dark and depressing talk," she said. "We can't change the outcome this time, but things will be different from now on, right? Besides, it's almost spring vacation, and there's parent–teacher meetings to prepare for as well. You need to think about your future path too."

With that, Hoshinomiya tried to wrap things up, if only because she didn't want to stand around breathing in the depressingly soured air in the classroom forever. Ichinose, though she had held victory in her sights, had been unable to attain it. She had been unable to demonstrate her true potential against Ayanokouji, and had been overwhelmingly crushed. She started feeling unwell from that day onward and began taking time off of school.

She approached spring vacation with a dark, ominous cloud looming over her and, in the end, didn't show up at school even once.

Chapter 3: Another Time

It was saturday, March 19, not long after the fierce battle of the End-of-Year Special Exam. At seven o'clock in the morning, Ryuuen exited the dormitory alone and headed toward the outskirts of the school. It was a bit chilly out, and early enough that many students were probably still sleeping. When he arrived at his destination, he noticed that the person he was planning to meet had already arrived. They were quietly gazing out at the scenery, with their slender back facing Ryuuen. After watching that person's back from a spot a short distance away, Ryuuen walked up to them, deliberately approaching with loud footsteps.

"Got here awfully early," he remarked, calling carefully so as not to startle them.

Since the conclusion of their match, these two had not seen each other for several days, due to a series of coincidences. What kind of face would that person be making when they left? What would they say? Ryuuen didn't have any desire to start a fight or instigate; he genuinely wanted to know those things.

With her cane in hand, Sakayanagi slowly turned around. When she looked at him, Ryuuen saw the same strong will in her eyes as ever.

"That is simply because my legs are so bad, after all. I need to get moving far before the average person," said Sakayanagi, explaining her early arrival. "Besides, I felt a sense of regret when I thought that I would soon be taking in this scenery for the last time."

Her tone suggested that this was the true reason why she went out for a walk earlier

Ryuuen was the one who called her out here.

Sakayanagi was the one who was called out.

Sakayanagi had been intending to wait for Ryuuen to speak first, but he kept his mouth shut. He was trying to determine whether he should just cut straight to the heart of the matter, but found himself unable to read her expressions and mannerisms to interpret what kind

of emotions she was feeling. For her part, Sakayanagi could see Ryuuen's heightened caution and decided to relax her own guard around him a little.

"Thank you very much for giving me a temporary reprieve before I voluntarily withdraw from this school," she said. "It was quite helpful, as I needed a little time to take care of some unfinished business."

Originally, the bet between Ryuuen and Sakayanagi was that the loser would voluntarily withdraw from school. It wouldn't have been strange at all if Sakayanagi had packed up her belongings and left the school together with Maezono immediately after the End-of-Year Special Exam had ended. The reason Sakayanagi had been able to stay here even this long, a few days after the exam had ended, was because of the permission of Ryuuen, who was nothing but an enemy to her.

If Sakayanagi's removal from the school had been handled based on the rules set forth by the school for expulsion, there would be detailed regulations to follow and her expulsion would have been immediately enforced. However, Sakayanagi's withdrawal was a voluntary one, established independently by the students of their own initiative, and agreed upon by both parties of their own accord. Although the school was made to function as an intermediary between them to ensure that the arrangement was honored, no detailed rules were set by the two parties, and it wasn't made clear whether the loser would or would not be leaving the school by the end of the actual exam day. Therefore, they talked about it and decided that the withdrawal would be by the end of the month, and the school had followed that decision.

"Hope ya don't think for one second that I showed you consideration for yer sake," snapped Ryuuen.

"Oh my, is that not so?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Don't get it twisted. It was simply more convenient for me, that's all. Figured it'd be best to give ya a little more leeway, to let the reality of you gettin' kicked out of school sink in real nice for all those Class A folks."

After all, if Sakayanagi had disappeared immediately after the exam without anyone knowing why, then he wouldn't be able to hand her classmates that cruel reality and that shock.

"Oh, wait a sec, I forgot. You ain't even Class A anymore," added

Ryuuen.

When Ryuuen deliberately flashed a smile at Sakayanagi, she smiled back in return.

"I see. You did it for yourself, then, and nothing more. In that case, I suppose I will retract my words of gratitude," said Sakayanagi.

Ryuuen snorted derisively and thrust his hands into his pockets when he saw that Sakayanagi's demeanor remained unfazed, despite his provocation.

"As promised," Sakayanagi continued, "I shall be leaving this school shortly. So then, what business do you have with me?"

Seeing how Ryuuen was acting and that he wasn't immediately cutting to the chase in this conversation, Sakayanagi gently urged him to speak freely, as she sensed what this was about.

"Well, I've got somethin' I wanna ask ya, before the loser leaves this school in misery," said Ryuuen.

Instead of showing mercy to his defeated opponent, Ryuuen once again rubbed salt in her wounds, trying to provoke her.

"Go ahead, then. Please do not hesitate. Go on and ask. I would be more than happy to answer if I'm capable of doing so," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi demonstrated that she welcomed having a conversation, almost as though she had come to this place for that exact purpose. Everything should have been arranged in such a way that they could proceed with talking now, yet Ryuuen opened his mouth only to quickly close it again. However, there was a slight difference this time compared to what happened the previous time.

Despite his best efforts, his words weren't coming right away. What Ryuuen intended to ask were things that he could only come to know right here, and that he could only know right now. However, hesitation had arisen. Should he confirm or not? He should have had the answer in his mind, yet he was swayed by the sight of the girl before him. To avoid letting her see that, Ryuuen started walking and passed Sakayanagi's side, and then stopped again once their backs were facing each other.

"Feels like you've always been actin' no different from usual, even since yer withdrawal was set in stone. Ya just tryin' to make a show of courage?" asked Ryuuen.

"Well, now, what do you think? How did I appear in your eyes?" asked Sakayanagi in return.

"...Hmph."

No different from usual. A cocky, brash chick, through and through. Those were Ryuuen's honest impressions. As long as his opponent wasn't letting her confident attitude crumble, Ryuuen couldn't allow himself to hesitate either. There were things that had to be asked and answers that had to be heard.

"I ain't satisfied with that match," said Ryuuen.

Words that he struggled to spit out. Emotions that had never existed in him until now, emotions that he had never experienced before, were being dragged out into the light of day.

"You aren't satisfied? But the outcome was made quite clear, wasn't it?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Don't bullshit me. I admitted defeat to ya in the end," said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen had been preparing to accept the reality of being taken out by a good, worthy opponent, albeit with some frustration. He had also prepared to swallow the reality of having to withdraw from school. However, when the time came, the results weren't what he was bracing for. In a way, these results were more difficult for him to accept without question, without any room for discussion.

"You gave it every effort, and, once you decided that the outcome was settled, you stepped off of the playing field. However, that was only a premature judgment on your part. It is simply not a true conclusion," declared Sakayanagi.

When you've thought you've won, you end up losing. When you've thought you've lost, you end up winning. From time to time, that was simply how a competition played out.

"Even so, this time was different. If this happened just between you and me, I would accept it, but Ayanokouji's message or whatever it was turned the outcome upside down. Are ya tellin' me to just accept it wholesale?" asked Ryuuen.

"Whether you accept it or not, the results are the results. There is no changing them," said Sakayanagi, speaking in logical terms to someone who tried to defy logic. "Though, that being said, I can understand your feelings, Ryuuen-kun. I imagine that, without knowing the reasons why I accepted defeat, it would feel like a small bone was stuck in the back of your throat."

The situation where there was a 99 percent certainty of defeat for Ryuuen had been completely flipped. Without a doubt, "Ayanokouji's message," which Ryuuen had heard about, was the only reason for that. A message from none other than Ayanokouji. That guy had always rather creeped Ryuuen out, but he couldn't have imagined that he could turn something like their competition upside down with a single message.

"If I wanted to win like that, then I could've," he said, "but ya purposefully took on the risk of getting expelled and let that traitor Hashimoto off the hook. What the hell kinda message could make ya bend over backward to that idea?"

That was something that he could only know by questioning either Ayanokouji or Sakayanagi.

"Well, now," Sakayanagi said. "Personally, it would be amusing for me to leave you with that unpleasant unfeeling, but I have said that I will answer anything that I can provide an answer to, so I shall give you a special lesson."

After that declaration, Sakayanagi thought back to her behavior during the exam and gave a self-deprecating smile. Ryuuen was unable to see the expression on her face precisely because they stood with their backs to each other. Perhaps they were each wearing expressions that they didn't want the other to see.

"Through you and Hashimoto-kun, I received a message from Ayanokouji-kun. It was about what Ayanokouji-kun had originally envisioned," said Sakayanagi.

"...Huh?"

"He has one year remaining at this school, and he wanted you there with him, not me. If one of us were to be expelled and disappear, he wanted to fight not against Sakayanagi Arisu, but Ryuuen Kakeru. That's what his message was."

That was the message that Ayanokouji conveyed to Sakayanagi.

"So you're sayin' that you figured out the message and lost of your own free will? And on top of that, you're sayin' that not only are ya not

gonna destroy Hashimoto, but you're just gonna overlook everything? That's ridiculous," spat Ryuuen.

Faced with Ayanokouji's message, before he could even accept it or not, feelings of fury welled up within him. Yet his anger wasn't directed at Ayanokouji for intervening, but at Sakayanagi for her overly lenient thinking.

"If I were given a message like that, course I'd ignore it, obviously," said Ryuuen. "I'd crush Hashimoto, and then I'd beat the shit outta him while I was at it. Ain't no way I'd let him get what he wanted."

"Knowing you, I suppose you very well might have," Sakayanagi replied. "It's simpler than you think, though."

"Come again?"

"It is true that had this message directly come from you, Ryuuenkun, or Hashimoto-kun, or from another third party, I most certainly would not have gone along with it, just like you wouldn't have," said Sakayanagi, thinking back on her conversation with Hashimoto during the End-of-Year Special Exam. "It is precisely because it was a hidden message that I decided that the best course of action would be to consider it carefully."

"I dunno what you mean by that," said Ryuuen.

"No, I suppose not," she replied. "I am sure this is something that only I can understand."

Ryuuen, in response to that incomprehensible explanation, looked over his shoulder and scowled. Even without turning around herself, Sakayanagi could imagine the look on his face, and she smiled.

"I have not completely accepted it, of course. To be honest, I lay in bed for about half a day afterward," said Sakayanagi.

Although, from another angle, that meant that she had recovered in half a day.

"Don't ya think that you're better suited to fight that guy?" asked Ryuuen. "That you're the one who should go up against Ayanokouji?"

Ryuuen had no intention of making such a self-degrading statement, but when Sakayanagi gave him such a stupid, ridiculous reason, the words just tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

"I understand your frustration, that you were unable to gain the right to challenge him with your own hands. Even if I forced myself to beat you, Ryuuen-kun, then..." Sakayanagi paused. "Actually, no, let's stop engaging in what-if scenarios."

Ryuuen, standing behind her, still wasn't satisfied with the outcome of their competition. He didn't quite understand how he felt about it now, only that it felt heavier than expected. That was because Ryuuen had thought that he would simply be happy with a win, no matter how he got it. On that point, Sakayanagi's insight was off. The only thing running through Ryuuen's mind now was what he should've done instead.

"It was a mistake, passin' Ayanokouji's message on to you," said Ryuuen.

"Hee hee hee," chuckled Sakayanagi.

"What's so funny?" asked Ryuuen. "You destroyed yerself 'cause of that message. He intervened to determine who won and who lost, even though nobody asked him to. I should've ignored it and fought until the end just for me and nothin' else."

"Until you were defeated by me and accepted your defeat?" challenged Sakayanagi.

"Don't be so sure," Ryuuen shot back. "If I used my traitor rights effectively, there's a possibility I could've beat you."

If Ryuuen had no intention of delivering the message, then he could've used that card on his own time. He had been fighting with a handicap, albeit a small one.

"I see. That is certainly true. However, I would not have lost even if you held onto your traitor rights, or if you exercised them as part of a strategy."

Sakayanagi stated that definitively. She didn't say that she might not have lost; she had said that she most definitely would not have lost. That was because she was confident that no matter when Ryuuen were to exercise those rights, she would've been able to respond accordingly, flawlessly. However, since it was clear that neither side would budge an inch on this subject and it would only lead to circular discussion, they both had no choice but to just let it go.

"Right now, you are in more danger than you imagine, and yet

you think you can defeat Ayanokouji-kun while in such a state?" asked Sakayanagi.

"I will. Obviously, I'm gonna beat him. That's why I'm standin' here right now."

"I see. However, do you think you can win against him in just one more year?"

"Course I can."

"Do you really mean that? You seem incredibly unsteady on your feet. I am sure that Ayanokouji-kun would have the same impression if he saw you right now."

Normally, one would've been disgusted by Ayanokouji's ridiculous message, and it wouldn't have been strange if they rejected it. However, Sakayanagi sounded truly, deeply happy as she talked about Ayanokouji. Although Ryuuen didn't know the details of the situation, he could at least tell that Sakayanagi's love was genuine.

"Yer free to be delusional 'bout Ayanokouji all ya like, but I don't have to like it, and I don't," spat Ryuuen.

"Don't have to like it, you say?" asked Sakayanagi. "You've been glossing over things quite a bit for some time now. Is it not your creed to win by any means necessary, no matter what? When Ayanokouji-kun tasked you with delivering a message to me, you could not ignore it, and your ability was simply insufficient to defeat me. You could not measure up to me, who understood the message and accepted defeat. Is that not all there is to it?"

As a result, Sakayanagi, even as the loser, accepted her loss more gracefully than Ryuuen accepted his win. That only made Ryuuen even more frustrated. He knew the real cause: It was because Sakayanagi was right.

"Do not mistake him for a saint," Sakayanagi cautioned.
"Ayanokouji-kun's actions are rooted in his own self-interest. If it's for his own sake, then others are nothing more than disposable pawns. You and I may be of a similar type to him, Ryuuen-kun, but he is in another league entirely. Ayanokouji-kun genuinely thinks that way, from the depths of his heart. Unmistakably and unfailingly so. Now, he has evolved even further, here in this school. He has found his purpose. And for that purpose, he will hurt others, drive them to expulsion, or even manipulate others to win or lose, without compunction. *That* is the

person known as Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. In a very literal sense, he will use whatever can be used, whether that be someone's fleeting romantic feelings, or a special relationship. He uses anything and everything only for himself."

One-on-one. Fair and square. Even if both parties had decided things to be that way, Ayanokouji was essentially free to act as he wished, as an outsider to the agreement. In truth, Ryuuen himself had fought battles in such a self-serving fashion all his life. However, even in areas he felt he excelled in, Ayanokouji easily surpassed him. Ayanokouji executed his moves so perfectly, and without any waste, that it was almost infuriating.

"Heh... I underestimated just how obsessed you are about a guy who is that crazy in the head," spat Ryuuen.

"I am proud to say that when it comes to feelings for Ayanokoujikun, I will not lose to anyone," said Sakayanagi with a boastful smile, like a child showing off a toy. "But I understand. How you feel, that is. That you do not like it."

Though she was speaking to Ryuuen, the words were directed partially at herself. Of course, Ayanokouji had probably also envisioned a future in which Sakayanagi had won. There was no doubt that Ayanokouji considered all the possibilities and planned for each, no matter how things turned out. He always prepared a myriad of options and kept all potentials in mind.

"He had even calculated that you would suffer as a result of this outcome," Sakayanagi added. "If his calculations could be wrong, it's only in that you could be in such mental distress that you would lose your fangs over it."

Sakayanagi wore a smile, aimed at the person behind her, which seemed to be saying, "You're not that weak, are you?"

"I—" began Ryuuen.

"If your fangs really have fallen out," Sakayanagi went on, "then Ayanokouji-kun might actually have second thoughts. He'll start to think that it was I, and not you, who deserved to be on the battlefield."

It's not like I lost my will to fight or nothin'. Though Ryuuen told himself that, the truth was that he couldn't hide the fact that he was taken aback. Sakayanagi, having intuitively sensed Ryuuen's emotions, honestly envied him.

"I will miss it, after all. That I can no longer continue to watch over what Ayanokouji-kun does from a special seat," said Sakayanagi.

"If that were true, then wouldn't ya be beggin' to stay, even if you had to bow down to me?" said Ryuuen.

In fact, Sakayanagi's withdrawal from school had not been officially carried out yet.

"Unfortunately, I have no intention of doing something like that. I have already packed my bags. Besides, I, for one, think that this ordeal has been a good learning experience. I have been able to broaden my horizons, if nothing else."

In contrast with the troubled Ryuuen, Sakayanagi was about to take another step forward.

"Well, that's too bad. Y'know, if ya just rubbed yer forehead 'gainst the ground and apologized, I could've gone to the school and wiped away our little bet, yeah?" replied Ryuuen.

"Let's not suggest something so tactless as that, hm?" said Sakayanagi. The fact was, her will was firm and unwavering, even as she wore a slightly disappointed smile. "At any rate, this was rather unexpected. You even goaded me as soon as we met, so I thought you would have been overjoyed about this outcome, but..."

"This End-of-Year Special Exam alone was special. That's what I thought," said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen had planned to defeat Sakayanagi fair and square from start to finish this time, because he had unshakable confidence that he could defeat her. Instead, she had outclassed him. Even though the feeling of defeat was heavy, Ryuuen felt more satisfied than frustrated with that process.

"I dunno how to take this," he said. "I've never felt this way before. A win's a win. I should be happy, just like ya said. That's what I've thought all this time, but now, I've got these doubts in me."

Just casting each other aside would've been simple, natural even, since they weren't allies. However, Sakayanagi honestly felt like she wanted to support Ryuuen now.

"I'll offer you a solution. If you are not willing to accept the reality that you have won, then you can just withdraw from school," said Sakayanagi.

"Huh?" said Ryuuen with a blink.

"Listen, if you want to lose to me, then go ahead. You can lose right now. If you choose to leave the school voluntarily before I do, then that would undeniably be a defeat."

When she looked back and saw Ryuuen glaring at her, she laughed.

"Hee hee. Well, I meant what I said, but I suppose I phrased it in a somewhat mean-spirited way," said Sakayanagi, deciding to grant the lost Ryuuen some advice on his path, as a class leader. "Fighting Ayanokouji-kun means that you must also face your own contradictions, the ones that you are currently carrying within you. He cannot be measured by a simple metric. Using those contradictions as a weapon is the only choice you have, to the point that I feel as though even I may have been mistaken in my assessment of him."

It was precisely because Sakayanagi had seen and felt for Ayanokouji more than anyone else that her words carried weight.

"What I said to you earlier, that you could just withdraw from school voluntarily, is true," added Sakayanagi. "However, losing is always an option. Yet, despite the pain, you have won this time, so you still have the right to continue fighting. To give that up so easily would be something that only a fool would do, wouldn't you say?"

Ryuuen may have been struggling with feelings of uncertainty and hesitation, but from the start, he had no intention of giving up his win. There was no way that Ryuuen, who was hungrier for victory than anyone else, would make such a choice.

"You have to keep fighting in a crude, uncouth way. You have to really sink your teeth in. There are things that you can only get if you do it that way. Eventually, it'll be for your own good. However, I cannot guarantee that it is hope that awaits you at the end," said Sakayanagi.

Currently, Ryuuen's abilities were no match for Ayanokouji's. No matter how optimistic he might try to be, there was no changing that reality.

"While you paw at the ground and struggle, I for one will be eagerly awaiting the day when I can fight him again," said Sakayanagi.

"You're gonna keep chasin' after Ayanokouji, even though he says he doesn't need ya?" asked Ryuuen.

"Of course," answered Sakayanagi. "While it is certainly true that I had stopped walking forward for a moment, my feelings have not changed whatsoever. Once again, Ayanokouji-kun is someone special to me."

After a few moments of silence, Sakayanagi gave a peculiar smile.

"Though weakened, your spirit does not seem to be dead," said Sakayanagi.

"Hey, I've suffered similar humiliations in the past at this school," Ryuuen said. "Maybe those experiences are what's kept me alive."

Otherwise, he wouldn't be standing here right now. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he had been guided to this point by Ayanokouji.

"Please allow me to give you my greatest piece of advice: Know that you cannot defeat him alone," said Sakayanagi.

"You call that advice? Don't make me laugh," spat Ryuuen.



"You know very well how high the walls are for the human being known as Ayanokouji-kun. Although you have grown over the past two years at this school, you will never be able to overcome that wall. You are tyrannical, savage—you can make full use of those such abilities, but such things are mere child's play to Ayanokouji-kun. He can fight without hesitation even in your area of expertise," said Sakayanagi.

"Then what're ya tellin' me to do, exactly?" asked Ryuuen.

"I am saying that you must change your way of thinking, that you must learn to think more flexibly," she replied. "It is nearly impossible to defeat Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun, who is close to absolute perfection. Not only with a frontal attack of course, but even outlandish schemes will not work. Which is why I will specifically create a weak point within him."

"You sayin' you're his weak point?" asked Ryuuen.

"Yes. This may help you someday. No matter how superior an intellect he possesses—no, actually, it is precisely because he possesses such superior intellect that it leads to unexpected weaknesses," said Sakayanagi.

Ryuuen was getting this advice because Sakayanagi wanted to, in her own way, get back at Ayanokouji for being mean to her. She was convinced that she could control Ayanokouji's thinking, just as he had controlled the outcome of their match by using a message that no one but a genius like her could've understood. Ryuuen, for his part, was choking back ridiculous, absurd feelings, like "Sakayanagi's better at that than me..." He could feel the words there in the back of his throat, clawing to get out, but this time he forcefully swallowed them back down.

"It is a good thing to continue being lost for a while. If you do not give up, you will find a way," said Sakayanagi.

"You two just go off and talk like ya can see into other people's heads. You and Ayanokouji," spat Ryuuen.

"That is the greatest possible compliment," replied Sakayanagi, chuckling and poking at the ground with her cane. "Well, then, shall we wrap things up here? I have some other plans to attend to."

Ryuuen realized that they had been absorbed in conversation for quite some time. Most likely, this would probably be his last

conversation with Sakayanagi.

"So, what're you gonna do when you get outta here?" asked Ryuuen.

"I have been told which school Masumi-san has transferred to. I intend to visit her there first and offer her an apology while I am there," Sakayanagi answered.

"She's gonna be freaked out when you show up," said Ryuuen.

"Well, knowing her, I suppose the first thing to come out of her mouth will be a sigh." With that said, Sakayanagi began walking away. "Let us meet again another time. Until then, please do not get yourself expelled from school in a disgraceful manner."

Ryuuen had always had an adversarial relationship with Sakayanagi. Not just with her, but with anyone. Now, however, he felt assailed by an indescribable feeling of loss. Things had changed significantly not only because of the End-of-Year Special Exam, but because he had recognition from Sakayanagi. Perhaps it was because he had lost someone who could possibly be called a rival. From now on, Ryuuen would have to stand alone against Ayanokouji. Ryuuen never once looked back, not until he could no longer feel Sakayanagi's presence. However, it was then that a new, single question came to mind.

"Huh?" he blinked and suddenly turned around, but there was already no sign of Sakayanagi anywhere. "...'Another time'? There ain't no 'another time' for you. What, you bein' a sore loser?"

However, he cast that thought out of his mind, since there was no point in thinking about someone who was leaving the school. He was still himself, and first, he was going to set his sights toward the upcoming battle in his third year. Now that Sakayanagi was gone, he had to focus on his fight with Ayanokouji, even if he didn't want to. Although Ryuuen had returned to the competitive stage after getting a large number of Class Points, things like the point totals were nothing but fluff right now.

The road to Class A would stay closed unless Ayanokouji was defeated. Ryuuen's doubts had not completely disappeared, but even so, the fog had lifted thanks in part to the little goddess who didn't know how to take it easy on others. She told him to accept the fact that he was no match for Ayanokouji as he currently was, at least for the

moment.

"One year. Just one year, huh?" Ryuuen mused. "Ha! Bring it on."

For Ryuuen Kakeru, the most important single year of his life was about to begin.

Chapter 4: Vacant Throne

A FEW DAYS HAD ALREADY passed since the start of the spring vacation. The zeal brought on by the End-of-Year Special Exam was nowhere to be seen, and many of the students, regardless of grade level or class, were likely enjoying their spring vacation to the fullest right about now. However, some classes had less to celebrate: Ichinose's class, which had lost to Horikita's class, and Sakayanagi's class, which had lost to Ryuuen's class.

With only one year remaining, the students from both of those classes would need to carefully prepare for the battles ahead, steeling themselves for the challenges awaiting them rather than spending their spring vacation aimlessly. If they didn't, their future prospects would likely be bleak. This was a particularly big problem for Sakayanagi's class, who had only just learned that their leader was going to be withdrawing from school voluntarily. Once that fact had become public knowledge, I decided to call on certain people to meet up so that I could get a grasp of the situation in Class A.

Those certain two people were Morishita and Yamamura. The appointed time was ten o'clock in the morning, and the meeting place was near the dormitory.

In other words, none other than this place, where I was standing right now. However, even after five, and then ten minutes of waiting, there was no sign of either of the people I was waiting for. I was sure that they hadn't forgotten, as they had definitely read the message that I had sent them just after eight o'clock this morning. Even supposing that, hypothetically, something had happened, like one of them fell back asleep, it was hard to imagine that it would happen to both of them at the same time. I waited for another five minutes or so, but when neither showed, I tried calling Morishita. The phone rang, but she didn't pick up.

"All right then. Guess I'll try Yamamura," I thought aloud.

I didn't want to put too much mental strain on Yamamura, who was extremely shy, but I had no choice. I called her number even

though I felt sorry for her. It started to ring, then I heard a panicked voice through the phone.

"U-um sorry we're late!"

Before I could say anything, I could hear her talking to someone else.

"Huh? H-hang...the phone? B-but...time, it's...late, so...um, I..."

Yamamura sounded flustered, her words choppy and scattered when I could hear them at all.

"Is Morishita with you, by any chance?" I asked.

"Y-yes. Um, well... Wait, come to the back side of the dormitory? Ah! My phone, don't—"

The call suddenly cut off what sounded like a bit of a struggle.

"What in the world?" I wondered aloud.

I didn't really understand what that was all about, but she said something about behind the dormitory. Since I had at least heard that, I figured I'd head over there. It was only a two- or three-minute walk away.

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ARRIVED AT THE BACK of the dormitory like Yamamura had mentioned. And when I did, I immediately spotted Yamamura looking flustered and panicking. Morishita was there too, down on the ground on all fours for some reason. The things she did were inexplicable, like that time at camp when she put her hand to a large tree and said something about the voice of the forest. Although that time, it was a lie, meant to tease me, so I couldn't deny the possibility that this was just an extension of that kind of behavior. However, it was also true that Morishita was not a normal student...

I figured that the only way to find out for sure was to talk to them directly. As I approached, I saw that Yamamura's mouth was flapping open and shut, like she wanted to call out to me, but no sound was coming out.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

At my question, Morishita whipped her head back toward me and glared fiercely.

"Shh! You're too loud," Morishita shushed me. "Please quiet down immediately. I am in the middle of observing insects."

"...I said, what are you doing?" I repeated, asking her again more quietly so as not to make her angry.

"I told you, observing insects," she replied. "Have you become hard of hearing in the brief time that we have been apart from each other? Perhaps, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, you are—"

What she said after that was so vile that it's probably best only heard by myself and Yamamura, who was holding her head in her hands.

"It's not that I didn't hear you," I corrected her. "It's just that I couldn't understand you."

Yamamura silently and repeatedly bowed her head to me, apologizing. She was implicitly saying, "Sorry we're late!" Well, no, actually, she was saying, "I'm sorry that we couldn't meet up with you."

I responded with a wave of my hand to tell her that it was Morishita's fault no matter how you looked at it, so she shouldn't worry. For the time being, I decided to wait until Morishita finished crawling on all fours.

As for Morishita, she didn't seem to care at all about things like our scheduled appointment. She was too busy down on all fours to observe insects with her magnifying glass in hand. I had thought perhaps Morishita was just doing this as part of a gag, but she ended up making us wait for about ten minutes.

"Phew! Okay. That's it for now," declared Morishita as she stood up with a satisfied look, her casual clothes magnificently stained with dirt. She didn't even try to wipe it off as she put her magnifying glass away.

"How long has she been at that?" I asked.

"For over thirty minutes now," Yamamura sighed in response, without any of her usual hesitation, perhaps suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion.

What an incredible ordeal it must've been, accompanying Morishita.

"Am I not free to decide what I do with my own time?" huffed Morishita.

"Well, if you don't have a commitment, then sure, it's fine," I replied. "But if you do, then don't you think that you should do that another time?"

"What cumbersome phrasing. You should really study Japanese more," answered Morishita, pointing a finger at me as though I was the one being inconsiderate. "I am quite fond of creatures."



"Huh?" I blinked.

"It is rude of you to doubt me," she continued. "I bought an observation kit during summer vacation last year, and I became utterly engrossed in raising shield shrimp. Yes, I remember, those were some spectacular days."

"H-huh... I-is that so? I guess, I'm not sure that I can believe that..." said Yamamura.

Seemed like it wasn't just me; Yamamura was just as confused as I was.

"Unbelievable?" asked Morishita. "What do you mean by 'unbelievable,' Yamamura Miki? I would much prefer you lack presence than belief."

"Well, I, um, I mean, it's not that I was doubting... I guess, it's just, I was surprised is all..." stammered Yamamura.

"There is no point in trying to backtrack now after what you said. Very well. If that is how you are going to behave, then I will show you the notes I have recorded in the past," said Morishita.

Morishita, not liking the fact that Yamamura and I were both suspicious of her, began fiddling with her phone. She then thrust the screen before Yamamura's eyes.

"Please observe closely," said Morishita.

"I-it's too close, I can't see anything," Yamamura whined. "Also, it's way too bright!"

"That is because I have set the screen to maximum brightness," said Morishita. "It is a way to blind someone rather easily."

Her behavior was becoming harder and harder to understand, and I couldn't even tell whether she actually wanted to show us the screen or not. Actually, no, not becoming. Maybe this was normal because she always did things that were difficult to understand. Perhaps Morishita took it as a show of remorse when she saw Yamamura looking like she was about to cry, because she pulled her phone away. Then, less aggressively, she once again showed her notes to Yamamura. I was interested enough that I decided to take a little peek for myself.

The tap water needs to be left sitting for a day to remove calcium hypochlorite; this is a depressing start.

Day 2:

Tossed in about 30 eggs.

The early ones (3) hatched in about 6 hours.

They're really small.

Day 3:

6 more hatched. Since their bodies are transparent, I can see food passing through the larger ones when they eat the chlorella powder.

Day 4:

I observed 6 moving individuals. The 3 largest (ergo oldest) are still alive. I could not confirm remains of dead ones.

Day 5:

Day 6:

The 2 from yesterday are safe, 5 total are alive.

Day 7:

The 2 from yesterday ® now 1, and the 5 ® now 4.

Day 8:

5 are alive, but there are 2 that are clearly moving about much better than others, and I'm worried they will eat the others.

Day 9:

3 confirmed.

Day 10:

Found the shell after molting. It also smells like a living thing.

Day 11:

Large one over 1 cm in length.

3 are alive.

Day 12:

For a moment, I thought they got eaten when they dived down into the sand. I gave them a cucumber. They weren't able to bite into it with their mouthparts, so I ate it instead.

Day 13:

I gave them a carrot. They didn't nibble at it much. But I hate carrots, so I didn't eat it. I gave them some grains of rice, but they didn't really eat it. I'll eat those. I found about 4 molted shells. I'll try to change out about 1/3 of the water.

Day 14:

I gave them bread. They nibbled a lot of it. They're about 1.5 to 2 cm now. They're getting richer in color and significantly more unpleasant looking.

Day 15:

1 wasn't moving well in the morning. I have a bad feeling. 2 were dead in the evening.

Day 16:

The last one stopped moving. I'm sad. I have the impression that the largest individual had survived until the end. I think it was a good thing that I used the properly decalcified water from the water purifier for at least half a day. It was probably a good thing that I properly cleaned up the leftovers from their daily feedings using a dropper. I wonder if changing out the water or giving them bread was bad. I guess I shouldn't have given them sweet bread with fresh cream in it. Maybe I should have given them French bread, which has simple ingredients.

—That was where the diary ended.

Morishita wasn't lying; it looked like she had been keeping and observing the animals more thoroughly than I had thought. Rather, if anything, it showed that she was more enthusiastic about it than I had imagined. Even so, I still couldn't help but wonder as to why exactly she was showing me this for so long...

"So, what do you think?" Morishita asked. "I imagine that you two would like to try raising shield shrimp yourself, yes?"

"Um. Well, sure, I guess I might be a little interested," I replied.

"I think I'll, um, pass..." said Yamamura.

"Very well, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. I will gift you a breeding set. I bought two last year, so I can give you one. For the listed retail price, of course," said Morishita.

"You intend to take my money," I remarked.

"Naturally," said Morishita.

"I appreciate the offer, but let me put that on hold. I'm in a position where I really need to cut costs anywhere I can right now," I replied.

"Oh, dear. Well, that's all right," she said. "However, please give me your answer by this summer, because if you do not need them, then I will hatch them myself and observe them."

I had to say, Morishita was, in every way, the same as usual. Normally, it wouldn't be surprising if someone's expression clouded over a bit in response, as was the case with Yamamura.

I turned my attention toward Yamamura, who was probably feeling down right about now, and called out to her.

"It's a shame that Sakayanagi's withdrawing from school, just when you two were finally starting to become close," I remarked.

"To be honest, I still haven't fully taken it all in yet..." replied Yamamura.

At one time, she was simply being used by Sakayanagi. However, they later reached a mutual concession and became friends. If things went on like normal, they could have spent their last year at school as real friends. Unfortunately, something unexpected occurred, something that you could say was unique to this school.

"You wouldn't even dream of someone making a bet like that outside of the school rules," I remarked, meaning it as a compliment, and Yamamura gave a small nod.

"There's an unbelievably heavy atmosphere in the class, too," said Yamamura.

To be honest, while I hadn't observed that myself, it wasn't hard to imagine.

"Well, that's not unreasonable," Morishita calmly interjected. "I can honestly say that, thanks to this whole debacle, our chances of graduating from Class A are absolutely zero."

"I-I wouldn't go so far as to say that, though," Yamamura stammered.

"You have to say it," Morishita said. "There are some students who say things like they are 'going to show the pride of the former Class A' or that we are going to turn things around somehow, but that is simply because they do not fully grasp our situation."

"Do they not blame Sakayanagi's selfishness for causing this?" I asked.

"It is certainly a bit problematic that she gambled with her own withdrawal from the school without consulting the class. However, if someone were to bring that topic up, it would only expose the fact that we had been piggybacking off of her," said Morishita, acknowledging the undeniable fact that Class A's status had been maintained by Sakayanagi carrying them. "We have no choice but to accept it."

"What do you think your class should do from here on out?" I asked.

"I don't know," Yamamura answered with a shake of her head, as

if to say she had absolutely no idea what the future might hold. "I think that we...we'll probably have to give up on Class A."

"That is correct," said Morishita. "Now that things have come to this, we will have to steer the class toward a policy of accumulating Private Points and send a few individuals to the official Class A by the end of the third year to finish things there. Because even students such as Yamamura Miki can be rescued if they are blessed with positive growth."

"S-students like me, wha..." Yamamura stammered, then went quiet as she thought it over. "No, I suppose I can't deny that."

Although Yamamura accepted that comment, because of her low self-esteem, it sounded like it still hurt her a bit. Class A had maintained a large number of Class Points thus far, so they'd all probably be reasonably well-off financially. Besides, while the loss they suffered was significant, it was still possible for them to accumulate Private Points moving forward. It was a practical, businesslike decision, but one of the best moves they could make.

"But I'm sure that some students won't give up so easily," I remarked.

"That is a problem," Morishita said. "I am sure there is a cheap pride over having maintained our position as Class A thus far, but we cannot keep dreaming forever. The Class Points that we lost due to our class's defeat and then Sakayanagi Arisu's voluntary withdrawal were far too painful. We must understand that."

"Oh, that reminds me. What's the penalty for voluntary withdrawal?" I asked. "We in the other classes haven't been given that information."

Perhaps Sakayanagi's classmates were deliberately withholding that information. Once April arrived, everyone would know regardless, but there was nothing to be gained by letting that information get out now.

"Apparently, it varies depending on the circumstances," Morishita replied. "But in this instance, Sakayanagi Arisu's withdrawal was treated totally as a self-inflicted act, and so we suffered the heaviest penalty. We have lost three hundred Class Points."

There was no guarantee that their penalty would be as I imagined, but it sounded like my expectations were spot-on. Morishita and her

class were left with approximately eight hundred points, then. While it would appear that they could just barely stay in the fight, they had lost their leader. The emotional wound inflicted was more painful than the Class Points lost.

"The chances we have of being able to turn things around in the time we have left are—" said Morishita, before stopping abruptly.

"Th-the chances are?" repeated Yamamura.

"Brrrrrrrrr," Morishita trilled in reply.

"Huh?"

"What? What is that face you're making?" asked Morishita.

"Well, uh..." Yamamura stammered. "I mean, did you just, uh, go 'brrr'?"

"It is the sound of the Ai-chan Computer making calculations. Can't you even understand that much, Yamamura Miki?" Morishita asked. "This is why people around you call you a pessimistic downer, or a gloomy person, or say that your presence is more transparent than a sheet of tracing paper."

"P-people say those things about me?" asked Yamamura.

"At the very least, I certainly do," said Morishita.

I think that was completely Morishita's personal opinion, not the voices of those around Yamamura, but that itself was only my personal opinion.

"At any rate, please do not disturb me. Brrrrrrr-DING!"

It seemed she had finished her calculations, because Morishita nodded once, with a "Yes," and her eyes widened.

"The probability of our class becoming Class A with our own strength is approximately 10 percent," reported Morishita.

I figured that some students might be surprised by those odds, not thinking that could be the case for a class that had been defending its position of Class A tooth and nail until the End-of-Year Special Exam, but in truth, even 10 percent was probably a naively optimistic estimate. That just showed how small a chance Morishita and her classmates had at present.

"As Paper-Thin Yamamura Miki herself has said earlier, everyone is in a dark place now, as though they were attending a vigil," said

Morishita.

"I bet," I replied. "It would be a pretty strange problem if the mood was light right now."

"U-um, excuse me, but Paper-Thin...?" sputtered Yamamura.

"It's cool, isn't it? Like a street name," said Morishita.

"H-huh...? B-but it doesn't feel like that at all..." said Yamamura.

"You wish for me to stop?" asked Morishita.

"If you could, then yes, please," she replied. Surprisingly, even Yamamura seemed to care about such things. "B-but, even though Ichinose-san's class has the same amount of Class Points, everyone has a smile on their face. It's like, they're all so positive, but is their situation really so different from ours?"

"I see. You are saying that things are much the same for them regardless of whether Ichinose Honami is even there. You spewed venom in the middle of your statement," said Morishita, nodding with admiration and giving Yamamura a thumbs-up.

As for Yamamura, she probably didn't intend to imply such a thing, given that she hastily denied it, flustered.

"Supposing we are hypothetically in the same situation, so what?" Morishita posed. "Are you saying that because they have a positive attitude, there is a possibility they'll reach Class A? Let me be clear. An incompetent ally is more terrifying than a competent adversary. If you ask me, there is no tomorrow for those who are still thinking in such a flippant manner in this situation."

Yamamura recoiled in the face of Morishita's unceasingly, aggressive verbal assault, but Morishita was speaking the truth. Right now, you could say that those who could make normal judgments were indispensable to the class.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked.

"I thought that as long as Sakayanagi Arisu stood at the helm and gave the orders, I wouldn't need to meaninglessly stand out, but..." Morishita trailed off with a somber expression, looking like she was brooding, lost in thought.

"By any chance, are you saying that you'll lead the class from now on, Morishita-san?" murmured Yamamura, bracing herself for the answer.

"That is impossible," said Morishita.

"I-it's impossible?" repeated Yamamura.

"Unfortunately, I am not the type to lead people from the forefront," answered Morishita. "Which is why, though it will be bothersome, we will need to select a new leader during the spring vacation. If possible, I would have liked for that to have all been completed before Sakayanagi Arisu leaves the school. All I can do now is offer guidance in that process and, afterward, guide the conversation toward saving Private Points."

It was certainly true that someone needed to be cold and get the others to give up on Class A. It sounded like Morishita was willing to handle that much. Just then, Morishita glanced at me disapprovingly.

"I think that is enough idle chitchat," she said. "I think it is about time that you tell me the reason you have called us here today."

She said that like I was the one who had wasted a lot of time here, even though we had spent most of the conversation talking about her insect observation and the decline of her shield shrimp.

"You didn't call us here to mock us over our present situation, did you? Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, of the new Class A," said Morishita.

"I'm not trying to mock you. I was just curious about that situation is all," I replied.

"If that is the case, then you could simply ask the traitor," Morishita said. "I'm sure he will tell you everything. He might even blab about the things you do not need to know."

"U-um, Morishita-san? Uh, isn't 'traitor' a little harsh?" asked Yamamura.

"Forgive my rudeness. It was a mere slip of the tongue. At any rate, our current situation is just as I told you moments ago," said Morishita.

"Seems that way," I answered.

Although Morishita marched to the beat of her own drum, she seemed to be giving her class due consideration. However, it sounded as though Sakayanagi hadn't taken any kind of action for her classmates, who were currently lost. Although most of the conversation we just had

was irrelevant, I could call it successful since I had fulfilled my minimum required objective of gathering information.

Chapter 5: Anticipating

ACTUALLY ENDED UP being a little busy for the next few days after meeting up with Morishita and Yamamura to talk about shield shrimp. I ended up getting involved in a bit of trouble related to an alumnus, and I had to lend a hand here and there to resolve it. Fortunately, the problem was resolved without incident, so the arduous work was worth it.

However, while I was busy with that, Sakayanagi's voluntary withdrawal had become known not only within Sakayanagi's class but among the rest of the students, as if word had been spread intentionally. Additionally, there was the matter of Sakayanagi's inner circle. Although I had recently crossed paths with Sakayanagi by sheer chance, I didn't know very much since I hadn't spoken to her directly. Still, there wasn't any need to panic, because both Sakayanagi and I understood that now wasn't the time.

When I left the dormitory a little after ten thirty in the morning and walked down the path leading to Keyaki Mall, I saw three girls standing around talking to each other: Matsushita, Mii-chan, and Onodera.

"G-good morning to you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Mii-chan, timidly.

Mii-chan, the first to notice my approach, turned and greeted me. She even managed to smile at me somehow, even though I had gotten her good friend expelled. I wondered if she felt that she would have to accept it, even if only ostensibly. On my part, there was nothing for me to change, no matter the other party's attitude.

"It's a little unusual to see the three of you together," I observed.

"Mii-chan said she wanted to go to Keyaki Mall, and she was waiting here for someone. Since we ran into her, she asked us if we'd like to join her too," said Matsushita, her eyes creasing happily as she spoke.

Onodera nodded a few times in response to what Matsushita said. Apparently, the three of them hadn't originally intended to meet up.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, did you know that Sakayanagi-san is withdrawing from school?" asked Matsushita, turning to the other two for confirmation in a slightly exaggerated manner. "We were just talking about it."

"Yeah," I replied. "I just heard about it a little while ago."

"I was seriously shocked, for real," said Onodera, chiming in as backup. "I mean, it was unexpected that Ryuuen-kun's class won, for sure, but I had no idea something like that was happening behind the scenes."

Onodera crossed her arms and looked in the direction of the dormitory, for some reason. It was an exam where students didn't even know the details of what happened in their own class, and any information from other classes came much later. It wouldn't be surprising if some more details came out from this point onward that even I didn't know.

"When I was on my way back from club stuff yesterday, I saw Kitou-kun charging up to Ryuuen-kun in the lobby, and they gave off crazy-dangerous vibes," said Onodera.

"I sensed that things between Class A and Class C were more volatile than usual, but I didn't realize it was that bad," said Mii-chan, trailing off.

"I felt like it wouldn't have been surprising if a fist fight started," added Matsushita.

"Yeah, yeah!" Onodera nodded as she recalled what happened. She seemed almost excited, like she was having fun. On the other hand, Mii-chan sounded uneasy as she sensed that an act of violence about to happen.

"I kind of feel like there's been a bad feeling in the air at school lately," Mii-chan said. "I hope something strange doesn't happen."

Having lost the leader of their class, it was only natural to direct any disappointment, hostility, and so on at Ryuuen, as the cause of it. It was a story that could conceivably take a turn toward a worst-case scenario if people who were predisposed toward fighting happened to run into one another.

"I'm not confident that I would be able to stop a fight if I happened to come across one..." said Mii-chan.

"Isn't it fine not to put a stop to it though?" asked Onodera. "I mean, if it's between guys, they'd be fine if they just punch each other."

"Yeah. In fact, if something like that did happen, it'd be good news for us," said Matsushita.

If there was problematic behavior happening, the school was likely to hear about it, and it was already a well-established fact that such things would have some impact on Class Points.

"Not only did Class A, our most powerful opponent, lose the special exam, but it came with the added bonus of Sakayanagi-san's withdrawal from school. The winds are blowing exactly in the right direction for us," said Matsushita.

She had seen that there were benefits to enjoy, and felt keenly that it would work in her class's favor.

"No doubt about it," I replied. "It's highly possible that their class is going to suffer a big penalty too thanks to the withdrawal. If things don't go well for them, they might fall down to being Class C or even D."

The class that had maintained their position as Class A for two years could fall into last place. There weren't many students who would be able to take that calmly.

"I see. In that case, I guess it's no wonder why things're so tense, huh?" said Onodera, her happy look giving way to a slightly conflicted expression.

"Aren't you glad?" asked Matsushita.

"Yeah, I mean, of course I'm glad," answered Onodera. "But, I guess it's just, like, doesn't it feel like it was all just kinda an accident? If I were a student from Class A, I'd probably be super stressed out."

For better or for worse, the students in that class had been following the instructions of their singular leader, Sakayanagi.

"Maybe it'd be better if they just had a little fist fight, just once, to get it all out of their system," Onodera shared her recommendation for stress relief. "And I don't just mean the boys either."

"Huhhh?! I don't think that's a good idea!" wailed Mii-chan.

"Well, yeah, I mean, sure I'm giving an extreme example," said Onodera. "But I'm just saying that if they don't at least vent it all out, they won't be able to make it in the future."

"Personally, I'd like for them to keep on falling," said Matsushita. "After all, in terms of potential, Sakayanagi's class is still terrifying. Just because their leader has dropped out of school doesn't mean that their academic ability has declined."

That was certainly true. Even if their motivation was affected, if it came down to a contest of fundamental academics, they should still come out on top among the four classes.

"You want them to keep on falling? Wow," said Onodera.

"You're pretty harsh, Matsushita-san," added Mii-chan.

"I'm the type of person who sees things in a practical way by nature. When we're blessed with an opportunity, we have to take what we can get, without hesitation. After all, it's not easy to take Class A," said Matsushita.

Matsushita's answer was deliberately pushing a positive spin on the idea. She wasn't bragging about her own personality, it was simply her way of trying to tell Mii-chan not to get worked up over the minute details.

Then, Mii-chan received a call from someone.

"Excuse me for a moment. It's from Shinohara-san." Mii-chan politely excused herself and took a few steps to get some distance from us before she started to talk on the phone. I wondered if Shinohara was the person Mii-chan was going to meet up with originally.

Onodera, upon seeing Mii-chan taking the call, began speaking at a volume that wouldn't disturb her call.

"You know, Sudou-kun's been giving you all sorts of high praise lately, Ayanokouji-kun. Like 'Dude, he's amazing,' and stuff," said Onodera.

"Oh? Is that so?" I asked in return.

"Yeah, I was only half listening at first, but I think he said something like, when he saw how Horikita-san raised the white flag to Ichinose-san, he was kinda convinced. Oh, he did say it was too bad about Maezono-san, of course, but well, you know," she said.

"I feel like your true abilities are finally being acknowledged, Ayanokouji-kun," said Matsushita. "Then does that mean you've already noticed a while ago already, Matsushita-san?" asked Onodera.

"No, it's more like I just had a feeling is all," said Matsushita. "Up until now, I thought he hadn't shown off what he can really do because he hates standing out, but this time, he took on the role of general, and he really delivered results. I guess the engine's running at full throttle now, huh?"

"Well, something like that," I replied.

"Oh ho? I guess it's like they say, 'a skilled hawk hides its talons,' right? That's reassuring!" said Onodera, sounding impressed. She playfully smacked me in the chest, too lightly to hurt. "Maezono-san getting expelled was a shock, but even Mii-chan understands. She hasn't bad-mouthed you or anything, Ayanokouji-kun, so don't worry."

"It's okay," I replied, "I was mentally prepared, and I figured that even if she did say something, it was fine."

"No, no, that's not all right. You don't have to take all the responsibility, Ayanokouji-kun," said Matsushita.

"We can help too, so be sure to talk to us, okay?" added Onodera.

I continued my conversation with the three of them for a little while after that, but at a certain point, I had to tell them I had an appointment, and I made my way to Keyaki Mall ahead of them.

5.1

BY THE TIME I had arrived at the café where we were scheduled to meet, it was 12:17 p.m., and I saw that Hoshinomiya-sensei was already sitting there. She looked bored as she fiddled with her phone.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, announcing my arrival.

"You certainly are, Ayanokouji-kun. You're too audacious, making me wait a whole seventeen minutes for you," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"Sorry," I replied.

Even though I apologized, Hoshinomiya seemed disapproving—or astonished, rather—when she opened her mouth next.

"Huh? That's it?" asked Hoshinomiya-sensei. "Can't you at least tell me why you were late?"

"I slept in," I answered. "When I woke up, it was just before noon."

She wrinkled her brow at my random reason while massaging her temples. "If this were a date, that would result in a 100 percent chance of it fizzling out, you know. Poof!" Hoshinomiya chastised, pouting her lips in a further show of disapproval. "Well, taking you to task over it won't do anything but waste time. So? You said you wanted to meet me. What are you after?"

"What if I told you that it was because I wanted a date?" I replied.

"Knock it off," she said. "I don't feel like things would go well with someone who oversleeps on the first date anyway."

While I knew that this wasn't an ordinary conversation between a teacher and student, I continued.

"Hoshinomiya-sensei, I wanted to talk to you once again about the End-of-Year Special Exam," I said.

Up until this point, she had seemed to be morally offended, but upon hearing the topic, the tone of the conversation suddenly changed.

"Say what? Still?" she answered without any attempt to hide an expression that seemed to say, "Don't be ridiculous."

"Yeah, you're right, it might be too late. Horikita's class has already won, after all," I replied.

Not only was I late for our meeting, but I was also deliberately provoking her, so it was understandable that she was acting put off by the situation.

"You speak of your class as though it has nothing to do with you. Besides, that class is more like *your* class than Horikita's anyway, isn't it?" she answered, and while pointing out the subtle quirks in my expressions, picked up a napkin to wipe the water droplets left on the table from her cup. "I saw your match with Ichinose-san too. How could you do such a thing to a girl who likes you?"

"It was necessary to win," I replied.

"So you're willing to do whatever it takes to win, then?" asked Hoshinomiya-sensei. "You're fine with taking advantage of the feelings of a girl who loves you?"

"I don't see what the problem is."

Hoshinomiya-sensei dropped her face into her hands and sighed deeply. "You're awful."

"You're the same type as me though. Aren't you, Sensei?" I asked, deciding to take a jab at her false show of goodness.

"Don't you think that's a rude thing to say?" she replied.

"Deny it, then," I answered.

When I pressed her further, Hoshinomiya-sensei froze in silence for a few seconds. Then, she removed her hands from her face and briefly glared at me, but even so, she nodded in acknowledgment. Nonchalantly taking advantage of someone's love for you in order to win yourself. Putting aside the question of exactly how wise that move was, it was a strategy that both of us were willing and able to execute.

"Anyway, you went after Ichinose-san mentally in order to win the exam, and as a result, our class is now a complete mess both inside and out," Hoshinomiya said. "It's a total disaster. Do you understand the situation that we're in? I don't really want to talk about the details with you in the first place. Do you?"

The inside of Keyaki Mall was certainly a busy location, but if a student and a teacher were alone together, they would stand out regardless. In fact, while there were only a few students who were eyeing us right now, it seemed like more and more were starting to take notice.

"In that case, what kind of conversation did you expect to have?" I asked.

"Huh?" she responded.

"When I told you that I wanted to talk to you, you didn't refuse, Hoshinomiya-sensei. You agreed to it. And despite what you said, it didn't seem like you thought it was for a date."

"What if I thought it was for a student to talk about his problems, or something like that?"

"One's own homeroom instructor aside, that's not something a student would come to another class's teacher for."

"I don't know about that. If it were about romance, you couldn't

talk about it with Sae-chan, could you? Besides, I simply didn't think too much about what it was about when you asked me in the first place. I just thought that I would hear you out is all."

"Is that so?"

Hoshinomiya-sensei and I locked eyes with each other and—well, no, actually, we were trying to look into each other's hearts.

"You could have predicted that I would talk about the exam," I pressed. "And you also considered the possibility that there would be some useful information for you, didn't you? That's why you came all the way out there, after all."

"That's..."

The reason I was deliberately being so pushy was so that I could see her true intentions. Given her position as a teacher, she had to give herself some plausible deniability.

"Why don't we meet each other halfway and move this conversation forward?" I asked.

"Move this conversation forward, what—"

"You asked me for help before the special exam, right?" I asked, interrupting her.

I could see Hoshinomiya-sensei grow weary at that question. "What are you talking about?" she asked after a pause.

As expected, perhaps because she was wary, she wasn't admitting to it honestly.

"I refused at the time, but I thought that, depending on the conditions, there might be room for consideration in the future," I said.

"Huh? It's far too late for that," she said, her anger overtaking caution thanks to my infuriating statement. "The special exam is already over, and the results created a huge gap. And yet you're saying you're willing to help? No, no, it's too late. Are you stupid?"

"I understand how you feel, but it was right before a special exam, a big event for students," I replied with a sound argument, one that she couldn't refute. "If you came to someone with an unexpected proposal, practically anyone would be too upset and bewildered to make a sound judgment. On top of that, a student couldn't imagine being instructed by a teacher to betray their own class. Am I wrong?"

"Well...that's..." she stammered.

"I think that the point you were making wasn't a bad one. It's precisely now after the exam is over and I've cooled off that I feel like I can have that conversation with you again," I added.

Hoshinomiya-sensei likely wouldn't be pleased with this. Mirroring my response, Hoshinomiya-sensei also calmed down once again. That was because, just like how absurd it was that a teacher would lend a student a hand in committing a violation, a student helping a teacher commit a violation was also an aberrant action.

"No, even if that's true, this is still far too suspicious," she said. "What I proposed to you then, Ayanokouji-kun, was for you to lose on purpose. To put it another way, it was about betraying your class. It doesn't make any sense for you to say now that you're willing to hand over your victory in the special exam from this point onward."

"Come on, Sensei," I chided. "You understood the premise when you first made your request. It's the same thing. Namely that, if there is a reasonable level of quid pro quo, then it's a different story."

"Excuse me?" she asked incredulously. "You can't possibly be serious. Are you? Are you saying you would betray your class because you want to sleep with me?" Hoshinomiya-sensei, in her exasperation, looked at me with eyes so full of disdain that it was hard to believe she had been the one to originally suggest such a thing.

"Unfortunately, no, that's not it," I replied. "No, thank you. But I am willing to consider it under other conditions."

"What other conditions?" she asked in return.

"The most precious thing in this school, more than anything else, is Private Points. If you can work your magic to make things convenient for me somehow, Sensei, then I might be able to consult with you," I answered.

"You really mean that?" she asked after a moment of consideration.

"I never wanted to graduate from Class A, after all," I replied. "Besides, Private Points can enrich my life at school or be beneficial to me after graduation, so getting more isn't a bad thing."

"Yes, I certainly understand that you don't care very much about Class A status," she said. "But I'm sorry, I can't believe you. This whole conversation is far too suspect. Besides, what are you saying that you can even do in the first place, Ayanokouji-kun? Our last chance was this competition, and it's already over."

"There are special exams held in our third year too," I pointed out. "If you're fighting against Horikita's class, it wouldn't be impossible for me to hand over inside information. That alone would give you an advantage."

"Even so, it goes without saying that there's only so much that you can do on your own, Ayanokouji-kun. Hypothetically, even if your class lost, Sakagami-sensei's class would still be standing in the way. Plus, my class doesn't even have any ambition to aim for the top. It would be an exercise in futility, like squeezing blood from a stone," said Hoshinomiya-sensei, before letting out a dejected sigh. It sounded well-worn, as though she had sighed about the same frustrations for a long time. "The chance I gave you before the special exam was the first and the last. Do you understand?"

"So you're saying there's no room for negotiation. But then you will not be able to rise up to Class A, Hoshinomiya-sensei," I answered.

"That's none of your business. We will manage it ourselves, somehow," she replied.

"Somehow, you say?" I mused. "Before worrying about whether you can pull off a comeback like that, can you rebuild Ichinose's class and get them back on their feet?"

"There are ways to rise up to Class A without doing that, but I won't go into detail with you."

"Are you saying that you will use your power as a teacher to win, no matter how?"

"I'm definitely going to make it to Class A, and I'm going to use any means necessary to do it." She was glaring at me with the sharpest and strongest gaze I had seen all day. Then she finished the rest of her drink, which had little enough left that she downed it in one gulp, and asked what she clearly wanted to be the last question of our chat. "Are we done here?"

"Please wait," I urged.

"I don't have any inclination of spending any more of my precious time off with a boring kid," said Hoshinomiya-sensei. "That's fine, but I don't think those people over there feel the same," I replied.

"Over there?" she repeated.

Hoshinomiya-sensei turned, albeit reluctantly and puzzled, and stopped moving when she saw three people approaching.

"What is going on here?" she asked. "Why are Sae-chan and the others here?"

The three people who were approaching included Chabashirasensei, Mashima-sensei, and Sakagami-sensei. In other words, all of the other homeroom instructors in charge of the second-years.

5.2

It was after ten thirty in the morning that I had a conversation with Mii-chan and the other girls, and it was after twelve that I met Hoshinomiya-sensei at the café, which meant that there was a gap in my schedule. In truth, last night, at the same time that I contacted Hoshinomiya-sensei, I approached my homeroom instructor Chabashira-sensei as well, saying that I had something to discuss. I told her that I wanted to meet with her today at eleven o'clock in Keyaki Mall. Initially, Chabashira-sensei's stance was that she would hear me out at school, but when I insisted that this meeting really needed to be at Keyaki Mall, she finally agreed, albeit reluctantly.

It was understandable that she would be reluctant to meet with a student at Keyaki Mall, but I was confident that she wouldn't refuse. That was because my proposed talk with her might have included issues such as Maezono's expulsion from school, discord between me and my classmates, and other such topics. It wasn't difficult to imagine that she was worried about my state of mind. So I changed into my casual clothes, left the dormitory with plenty of time to spare before my appointments, and headed toward Keyaki Mall. However, since I ran into Mii-chan and the other girls on the way, I ended up arriving at 10:50 as a result.

"You're rather early," said Chabashira-sensei.

I saw the person in question in the distance. Chabashira-sensei had arrived even earlier than I had imagined, perhaps because she felt she had to set a good example as a teacher.

"You kept me waiting," I called out to Chabashira-sensei as she drew closer.

"I don't think I really kept you waiting," she said as she checked the time. "There's still a little time before our appointment. Don't worry about it."

After she answered with that, she glanced around, looking somewhat uncomfortable. Since I had chosen a place to meet that wasn't terribly crowded, we didn't see many students around, but I supposed that she couldn't help but be concerned.

"I never imagined I'd be meeting up with a student at Keyaki Mall," said Chabashira-sensei.

"It's never happened before? Not even once?" I asked.

"Absolutely not," she replied.

A teacher meeting with a student on a holiday. Though I didn't know what people would think at a normal school, I suspected that such a thing would not be particularly out of the ordinary at this school.

"Oh, yes, that's right," I replied. "Because before this, you had forcefully put distance between yourself and your students, after all."

"Ayanokouji, I'm noticing a lack of respect in your tone," she said with a glare.

"My apologies," I replied.

"That is not something that you can fix with just an apology."

Her philosophy was that if I was going to say something that required an apology, I shouldn't say it in the first place. As a responsible adult, she corrected the lack of respect in my speech.

"So, why was it necessary to go through the trouble of meeting at Keyaki Mall?" she asked.

After all, if this was a consultation between teacher and student, surely there were more appropriate places.

"I understand the situation is a bit out of the ordinary, Sensei, but I decided that it would be best to meet here," I replied.

"I'd like to hear your reasoning for that," she answered.

"I understand. However, it seems that the other two people have not arrived yet, so could you please wait?" I asked.

"Other two people?" she asked, surprised.

Well, of course she was. After all, I had deliberately not told her about it.

"This particular discussion is about a problem that I believe will be difficult to resolve one-on-one," I replied.

"Horikita and Hirata, then?" she asked after thinking about it for a moment, her expression growing sterner. "Is the situation even more serious than I had thought?"

Chabashira-sensei asked that question in a small voice because she had expected the issue to be about one of my classmates. There was probably no need for me to keep letting her think it was about the matter of Maezono anymore, and it might even be better for me to put her at ease somewhat.

"Unfortunately, no, that's not it," I answered. "It has nothing to do with Maezono or the class."

"Is that so? I thought surely, you were enduring the most criticism on that matter..." said Chabashira-sensei.

"Thankfully, it seems like the majority of the students were convinced in the post-exam discussion that what I did was necessary for them to win," I replied.

At the very least, no students have come after me asking for Private Points at this point.

"If that's the case, then I'm glad," said Chabashira-sensei, hand over her chest. It seemed like that genuinely soothed her concerns.

"It doesn't seem like they're on their way yet, so if you have any questions for me, Sensei, I can answer them now," I told her.

"Questions from me?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied. "You did see everything that happened in the End-of-Year Special Exam, right?"

When I asked her that question to pass the time, her expression, which had relaxed, tightened again.

"Students are free to decide how they will fight within the rules. I am pleased that the class won and that we are forecasted to be promoted to Class A as a result," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Even if one of your pupils is expelled in the process?" I asked.

"That's certainly not something to rejoice over, true," Chabashirasensei answered. "However, as a teacher, it is not proper for me to stick my nose into problems between students or the class. When I tried to use you before, the consequences were painful. I've learned my lesson, and won't be doing that again."

She was talking about what happened sometime around the Uninhabited Island Special Exam, in our first year. Chabashira-sensei had hinted at my father's presence and tried to use me to bring her class to victory. Of course, while it wasn't as though that was in violation of exam rules, it wouldn't have been surprising if she were called out on moral grounds.

"Now that you mention it, yes, that did happen," I replied.

Chabashira-sensei looked at me with resentment in her eyes, but after letting out a sigh, her expression changed into that of a wry smile.

"Well, while I have some mixed feelings over whether I could call it a fortunate error on my part, my eyes were opened thanks to that. Now I know that you're a student who doesn't show mercy, even when dealing with teachers," said Chabashira-sensei.

In that sense, today's meeting was exactly about that: dealing with teachers.

"That's because showing deference is not my forte," I remarked. "Anyway, it would appear that one more has arrived."

Chabashira-sensei turned her attention to the person walking toward us, and tilted her head, as if following him.

"Hmmm? Sakagami-sensei...?" she asked.

It wasn't a student, but Sakagami-sensei, arriving in casual clothes. Around the same time, Mashima-sensei rounded the corner as well. The men had arrived at almost exactly the same time, and now those three class's homeroom instructors had gathered along with myself.

"What in the world is the meaning of this, Ayanokouji? Was I not the only one you called to meet?" asked Mashima-sensei, the first to voice his suspicions. With those words, it was clear to everyone that they had all been led to believe this was going to be a one-on-one conversation. Now that he had a grasp on the situation, Mashima-sensei gave me a stern look and continued to reprimand me. "I am not impressed with you calling on a teacher under false pretense. That is a problem."

"Mashima-sensei," Chabashira-sensei cut in. "I haven't heard the details from Ayanokouji either, but I think that it's not too late for us to start by asking him to—"

"No, it is too late. There is an appropriate amount of distance to be kept between teacher and student. More importantly, there can be no lies between both parties, in order to maintain a relationship of trust," argued Mashima-sensei.

"That's... Well, yes, that's true, but—" said Chabashira-sensei as she tried to stop his diatribe.

"Now see here, Ayanokouji," Mashima-sensei ignored her entirely and started giving me a proper lecture. "As a student at this school, you ___"

"I have gathered information on Akiyama-san," I said, interrupting him.

"I will let you off the hook this time," Mashima quickly turned his back to me as he dropped his lecture for the sake of forgiveness. "Do not let it happen again."

"Mashima-sensei? Are you quite sure?" asked Sakagami-sensei. Having expected a lecture, he reflexively urged Mashima-sensei to continue after he had turned on his heel.

"I figured that giving him a lengthy warning here would only be a waste of my fellow instructors' time," said Mashima-sensei.

"I see. But who is Akiyama-san? I don't recall there being a student with that name," said Sakagami-sensei.

"Oh, well, don't pay that any mind. Listen, Ayanokouji, I'll talk to you privately about that later, understood?" said Mashima-sensei.

I nodded, and then Mashima-sensei responded with a deep nod of his own. Akiyama was the name of the female employee working at the gym in Keyaki Mall, which Mashima-sensei and I frequented. Mashimasensei seemed to be highly interested in her at the moment. He wanted to know if she had a boyfriend and what her preferred type was, and I had promised to help him find out about her hobbies and interests. To be perfectly honest, it was a hassle, but now collecting that information seemed to be paying off.

"What on earth is going on? Explain it to us in a way we can understand," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Of course," I said. "I didn't want word of this meeting getting out, which is why I didn't say anything in advance about gathering with all of you. As a matter of fact, I have called you here today for a certain purpose."

"Let's hear it," muttered Sakagami-sensei, arms folded. He must have thought that it was best to move the conversation along, and urged me to continue with a tone of voice that made it seem like he was deeply interested.

"The other day, before the End-of-Year Special Exam began, I was approached by Hoshinomiya-sensei. It was when I left the classroom to use the restroom, just when the rules were explained to the representatives and the participants were forming groups," I explained.

By laying out the situation in specific detail, the three people present here must have had their memories jostled.

"Chie—I mean, Hoshinomiya-sensei?" asked Chabashira-sensei, correcting herself to the family name since she was in the presence of Mashima-sensei and Sakagami-sensei.

"If I remember correctly, she had said that she was going to briefly stop by the restroom. Was that when it happened?" asked Sakagami without hesitation. He must have a clear memory of that day.

"Truthfully," I replied, "I don't think that Hoshinomiya-sensei had any business in the restroom. After talking with me, she went back to the waiting room straightaway."

"So in other words, you're saying that it was an excuse for her to talk to you alone, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Sakagami-sensei.

"That's correct," I confirmed.

"But there are no rules against teachers and students talking to each other," he remarked.

"I've determined that it wasn't the fact that she spoke to me that was the problem, but rather, the contents of that conversation," I

replied.

I proceeded to give an accurate report of my conversation with Hoshinomiya-sensei back then, without concealing anything. That was because nothing good would come of it if what I told them contained any lies, misunderstandings, or misleading statements. I told them that she had asked me to hand over the win. That she said that Chabashirasensei was the one person to whom she couldn't lose. I also told them about how she said that she was willing to do whatever she could as repayment, that she wouldn't even mind giving me advanced information about upcoming special exams, and that she even hinted at paying me with her body.

By the time I had finished telling them everything, Chabashirasensei had a look of anguish on her face as she held her head in her hands, and Mashima-sensei let out a sigh, not even trying to hide his despondency.

"If that's true, that is a terrible problem," said Mashima-sensei.

"Mashima-sensei. If we leave Chie be, her deviant behavior as a teacher may escalate further in the future," said Chabashira-sensei, apparently understanding the gravity of the situation.

"It is an especially troubling story, but I'm afraid there's nothing else we can do. Actions such as unfair intervention cannot be tolerated whatsoever," said Mashima-sensei, nodding with a stern look of determination. "If we act now, we can still make things right."

"How do you plan to handle it?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"If Hoshinomiya-sensei's conduct is corrected, it's possible we can keep this matter between ourselves. Ayanokouji has flatly refused to cooperate with her anyway, so it's not as though the problem has come to light, after all," said Mashima-sensei.

While I wasn't certain whether it was because they were peers or whether it was simply because they were each homeroom instructors for the second-year students, Mashima-sensei's priority seemed to be that he didn't want to make the problem bigger. Chabashira-sensei was of the same opinion; she did not seem to object. However, Sakagamisensei, who I suspected had no personal association, would likely not show any consideration. His own class was now on track to become Class A, and he most definitely wanted that to remain the case.

"Now, hold on a minute here, you two. Sure, even if she didn't

succeed, you're really letting it slide? If this is true, it is a matter that ought to be reported," argued Sakagami-sensei.

"But that's—!" Chabashira-sensei already had her hackles up, but Sakagami-sensei calmly quieted her down.

"Please do not jump to hasty conclusions," he cut her off. "I don't mean that we have to report it to the school immediately, right this second."

For the two former classmates, it was Sakayanagi-sensei who was likely the most troublesome presence here, but he calmly continued making his argument.

"Considering the way this school operates, it is inevitable that you would want your own class to win, by any means necessary. That isn't limited to students either, of course. Even adults sometimes use dirty tricks. Of course, it's not as though I haven't had my share of somewhat biased behavior in the interest of my own class," he said.

It wasn't clear whether he was talking about the time in our first year when Sudou was brought before a biased student council which had been fed with gossip, or something else.

"Whether we report it to the higher-ups or directly try to make this right ourselves, what we need to be careful of here is the credibility of the story. After all, we don't know if Ayanokouji-kun is telling the truth, do we? So far, all we have is his testimony," said Sakagamisensei.

"Don't tell me you're doubting a student. Is that it?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"I'm not saying that," said Sakagami-sensei. "But even so, we need hard evidence. If it turns out to be a lie that Hoshinomiya-sensei was trying to engage in such impropriety, she'd no doubt be indignant. If that happens, we, the ones doubting her, would be the problem. On top of that, we don't know what kind of punishment we would receive due to this."

"That's..."

Sakagami-sensei was highly skeptical, but I needed that in this discussion. The reason I didn't speak about it solely with Hoshinomiyasensei's peers, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei, was because I decided that it was essential to have a teacher who could look at the

situation more impartially.

"Besides, at this point, there's a nonzero chance that Hoshinomiya-sensei and Ayanokouji-kun were colluding with one another to try to set some kind of trap for us. Isn't that right, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Sakagami-sensei.

"I think you're exactly right. It's only natural that you can't trust my word alone," I replied. "Chabashira-sensei would want to stick up for me no matter what, as my homeroom instructor, and additionally, she has personal feelings involved. It is quite conceivable that even if she suspects something deep down, she wouldn't ask me for exact corroboration."

I had anticipated all of that ahead of time. Upon seeing me act in such a way, Sakagami-sensei touched the frame of his glasses.

"Judging from the way you said that, you have a good idea in mind, don't you?" asked Sakagami-sensei.

"Yes. I am calling Hoshinomiya-sensei to the café at noon, after this meeting. I didn't tell her what it was about, but I believe that the reason she accepted is because she knows it could be any number of things related to the exam. So, first, I will prove that what I just told you is the truth," I replied as I took out my cell phone. "Before I join Hoshinomiya-sensei at the café, I'll make a call to Chabashira-sensei's phone. Then, please listen to my conversation with Hoshinomiya-sensei in real time, and lend me a hand once you are assured of the details."

"So, you're saying you want me to eavesdrop?" Mashima-sensei was clearly taken aback as he expressed his dissatisfaction. "I am appalled."

"No, this would be the best option," Sakagami stepped in to pacify him. "Actually, I think this would be the best way to make sure we're getting the truth straight from her own mouth. Is that okay with you too, Chabashira-sensei?" asked Sakagami-sensei.

"Well, I... Yes, I suppose," said Chabashira-sensei, likely more perplexed that Hoshinomiya-sensei's conduct might be brought to light than reluctant about personally taking any steps toward making that happen.

"I can't say something like 'please rest easy,' but hypothetically, even if the truth turns out to be that Hoshinomiya-sensei tried to engage in impropriety, then I have no intention of making this into a bigger

issue if she promises that it won't happen again," said Sakagami-sensei.

"Would you really let it go?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Yes," Sakagami-sensei answered. "If I make myself unpopular by antagonizing you two, then I'll be left worrying for the next year. If things go badly and we end up losing because my class is under fire from the three other classes, it will be my fault."

As the homeroom teacher for Ryuuen's class, he didn't want to drag them down. Now that the process had been set in motion, I decided to take things from here and execute the plan.

"Could you all please wait here for a while?" I asked. "As soon as I meet with Hoshinomiya-sensei, I will connect with you on the phone, so please listen. When you have confirmation of the story, please inform me. If you do that, there will be no problem."

With that, I decided to wait alone near the café in Keyaki Mall.

5.3

That was what happened before I met Hoshinomiya-sensei at the café. The fact that the three teachers showed up at this location wasn't a coincidence, but an inevitability. Once the three teachers gathered by Hoshinomiya-sensei, they would attract even more attention whether they wanted to or not. Though Hoshinomiya-sensei appeared surprised at first, she responded to them by putting on a smile.

When the other teachers told her that they needed to speak with her, she showed an honest willingness to comply. However, it would be conspicuous if these four adults were huddled together, and having a student added to the mix would make our group stand out even more, so we decided to change locations.

Even so, the reason I had initially chosen to meet at a place where we would stand out, like Keyaki Mall, was so that I wouldn't be calling Hoshinomiya-sensei out to a place with no people around. If we were out in front of the general public, there was a limit to what we could do, no matter how any of us might be scheming. On the other hand, a secret meeting in a place with no one around would allow for the other

parties to make strategic moves without hesitation. We had considered going to the school, but given the nature of our conversation, it would've been bad if another teacher had happened to overhear us. Therefore, it was decided that the safest place to discuss the matter was in the teachers' dormitory, in Mashima-sensei's room.

As we made our way over there, Hoshinomiya-sensei shot me a look that seemed to say, "You've really screwed me over," but I feigned ignorance and just kept walking.

The room was a bit larger than a student's room, seeming to exceed forty square meters, but there wasn't anything particularly interesting other than that.

"Okay, what?" asked Hoshinomiya-sensei. "What's going on here?"

"You know, Chie," snapped Chabashira-sensei.

"I don't, which is why I'm asking," she replied.

In all likelihood, Hoshinomiya-sensei knew exactly what they were talking about. Even so, she wasn't likely to change her stance until they produced some solid testimony. Chabashira-sensei looked at her two other colleagues and then firmed up her determination to take the plunge.

"We can't possibly overlook using a student to..." Chabashirasensei paused. "No, we can't overlook a teacher going against the rules to try to win an exam."

"Excuse me? What?" asked Hoshinomiya-sensei. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sorry, but we heard it all from Ayanokouji. Making weak excuses to try to talk your way out of it will only hurt your case, Hoshinomiya," said Mashima-sensei, following Chabashira-sensei's lead and trying to give Hoshinomiya-sensei a warning.

"So does that mean you were listening over the phone at the café or something?" she asked, apparently unbothered.

"Yes," he replied.

"Hmph. I don't remember saying anything incriminating," Hoshinomiya-sensei said. "If you have proof, let's hear it."

"If you mean a recording, no, we don't have that, but the three of

us were listening," said Mashima-sensei.

"That isn't proof though, is it? That just means the three of you were trying to spring a trap on me, weren't you?" argued Hoshinomiyasensei.

From the way she was speaking, it sounded as though, far from being scared of the others taking issue with her, she was taking issue with the others.

"You don't know when to give up, I see," said Sakagami-sensei. "I suppose you won't mind even if we go ahead and report this to our superiors, then?"

Unlike Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei, who couldn't help but show discretion to their peer, Sakagami's words could not be taken lightly. Such naive thinking would probably be seen through immediately.

"Supposing if, hypothetically, I had requested Ayanokouji-kun's assistance, would that be a problem? Don't you think that it's going too far to call it 'improper conduct' when it's just asking?" asked Hoshinomiya-sensei.

She had refuted Sakagami-sensei without showing even the slightest agitation. It might have seemed like mere desperation on her part, but I could tell that it wasn't. I could commend her for observing the situation so well. As for Sakagami-sensei's threat to report to the school administration, neither Mashima-sensei nor Chabashira-sensei were panicking because they knew it was a lie.

"I think it's a big problem, though," argued Sakagami-sensei.

"Then go ahead and report it. Then, if I am to be subjected to punishment, I will resign myself to my fate and take whatever comes my way," said Hoshinomiya-sensei, firing back with all the courage she could muster.

It was certainly true that there was a fine line between making a report and making a homeroom instructor resign from their position. Deciding that they weren't getting anywhere like this, the three teachers decided to press harder.

"It's not just that you tried to commit an improper act by using Ayanokouji," said Chabashira-sensei. "I can't just sit on my hands and do nothing while you sully your own hands with such unacceptable conduct in the future, Chie."

"Heavens, no, Sae-chan. I'm not doing any 'improper acts' or anything. I don't know what you heard while eavesdropping on my conversation with Ayanokouji-kun, but you've got it wrong. I just tried to scare him a little," said Hoshinomiya-sensei, trying to reiterate that there was no way that she would really commit some kind of illicit act.

"I see, so that's how it is," said Mashima-sensei. "It's certainly true that if you behave yourself from now on, Hoshinomiya-sensei, there may be no need to bring this problem to light."

"Right? You're just making too big a deal of this," Hoshinomiyasensei said. "Well, anyway, Ayanokouji-kun is a kid, right? Maybe he just took my joke seriously, without really thinking about it. I didn't really intend to actually make him betray his class during the exam, I just wanted to shake him up a little. As the homeroom instructor for the class that looked likely to lose, I just wanted to get a win somehow."

It was clear that Hoshinomiya-sensei intended to talk her way out of this, no matter the cost. However, even if the three teachers pulled back here, you could say that this whole affair would still have a certain effect. Now that her scheme had become known, she wouldn't be able to make any careless moves in the future. If the other teachers decided to back off since Hoshinomiya-sensei was likely to behave herself from now on, that would be up to them.

My only objective was to prevent Hoshinomiya-sensei from leaving. I didn't care about either making or preventing her from doing anything improper. If she were forced to step down as homeroom instructor because of some stupid mistake, that would have a greatly negative impact on Ichinose's class, which I wanted to avoid.

"Can you promise me that you won't do anything foolish?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Of course, Sae-chan," said Hoshinomiya-sensei. "Teachers don't get involved in conflicts between students, after all."

"I'm not trying to mock you," said Chabashira-sensei, making an appeal both as her former classmate and current fellow teacher. "I'm seriously worried about you."

Chabashira-sensei, upon seeing that Hoshinomiya-sensei didn't seem to be taking this matter seriously, closed the distance between them, and placed her hands on both of Hoshinomiya-sensei's shoulders.

Feeling the weight of Chabashira-sensei's concern, Hoshinomiya-sensei's face stiffened. All this time, up until this point, she had only smiled evasively in front of the teachers.

"What the hell? Honestly, that kind of makes me want to throw up, so I'd rather you stop," replied Hoshinomiya-sensei, her voice icy as she tightly gripped Chabashira-sensei's forearm with her own hand.

"Chie?" said Chabashira-sensei, puzzled.

"You're seriously worried about me?" Hoshinomiya-sensei asked. "I don't need your worry. If you're so 'worried' about me, then I'd rather you not try going for the spot of Class A, which doesn't suit you."

"That's-"

"There is no way I can just sit around and watch your class go on to graduate from Class A, Sae-chan," added Hoshinomiya-sensei, letting her true feelings out, perhaps because Chabashira-sensei's words had offended her.

Meanwhile, the other teachers didn't appear to be particularly surprised. Rather, it looked like they were thinking something like "Oh, so that was the reason after all," or something along those lines.

"I've never forgiven you, Sae-chan. And I will never allow you to finish in Class A," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"I don't blame you for resenting me," Chabashira-sensei said after a moment's pause. "But we're not students now; we're teachers. Is it wrong for me to aim for Class A for the sake of my students?"

"Of course it is!" Hoshinomiya-sensei retorted immediately. To her, it didn't matter whether everything was for the sake of the students.

Then, she forcefully brushed aside Chabashira-sensei's hands that were on her shoulders. Sakagami-sensei, upon seeing her determination and will, crossed his arms with deep interest.

"I know that the two of you..." Sakagami-sensei trailed off, before correcting himself. "Well, Mashima-sensei too, if you want to be precise, I suppose. But I know that you are former classmates of this school. Additionally, I know that there was some kind of complication, albeit a slight one, within your class at the time. However, as Chabashira-sensei has said, that was during your days as a student. Supposing Chabashira-sensei does accomplish her goal of graduating from Class A, even as a

homeroom instructor, it would only affect her salary and her employee assessment at best. Is it that you would dislike the difference there would be from her getting that kind of assessment?"

"No, that's not it," said Hoshinomiya-sensei. "Yes, the only real reward for teachers who push their class to rank A is a slightly better result on evaluations and assessments. Obviously that's important. But the most important thing to me personally is..."

She paused, appearing slightly hesitant to say the words that were to follow. However, perhaps because she had come this far, to this situation, she pressed forward without giving up.

"Sae-chan might go ahead and bury the past on her own. It's that part specifically that I can't stand," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

That was the real reason that she was trying to do something about the situation, even if it meant going against the school or the students.

"Isn't that just a personal grudge, though?" asked Sakagamisensei.

During their student days, thanks to Chabashira-sensei's inability to abandon a friend for the sake of the class during the Unanimous Special Exam, Hoshinomiya-sensei's class had been cut off from their dream. That past could not be changed, of course, but that was precisely why those feelings of resentment weren't disappearing. Rather, they were growing day by day. At the very least, she wanted Chabashira-sensei to always feel the same kind of regret.

That was why she couldn't allow Chabashira-sensei to graduate from Class A in any way, shape, or form. Why she likely couldn't be talked out of it, even if Chabashira-sensei said that she wouldn't forget the past. That was because the problem wasn't just about Chabashira-sensei; Hoshinomiya-sensei was also held prisoner by the past. She wished for Chabashira-sensei to keep holding onto that sin, her failure to bring a pupil to Class A. If Chabashira-sensei were to realize her goal of graduating from Class A, Hoshinomiya-sensei would end up losing her pillar of emotional support.

"You can't possibly," Chabashira-sensei said haltingly, "Really, that much? No, I suppose it's only natural. I can't make excuses for it, but..."

"That's right, you can't. You understand, right?" said

Hoshinomiya-sensei. "I'm an awful woman, but it's fine. I'm used to people calling me that. I've made myself someone who's easy to hate, and I've lived with it for a long time. Since we've been together since our first year of high school, you know that very well, don't you, Saechan?"

To be practical and pragmatic. That was a strong way to live. It was precisely because she was confident that she could live that way that Hoshinomiya-sensei could openly express her resentment and bitterness.

"If you want me to give up thinking about it, then give up on your dream of Class A," she demanded.

"There's no way I could do that," Chabashira-sensei replied. "Besides, the idea of a teacher holding her students back is—"

"You could," Hoshinomiya-sensei cut her off. "At least, that's how things were in the past. As a cold teacher that was hated by others. Just doing things that way, alone from now on, might save me."

It was certainly true that the Chabashira-sensei I had met when I first came to this school and the Chabashira-sensei of today were completely different. I could tell when I first arrived in her class that she was wearing a mask, bearing sin and unable to express her true feelings. Whether a teacher can face their students is a factor that cannot be ignored by students who are still growing. It may also spell the difference between winning and losing in the competition for the position of Class A, which was only going to become more intense in the future.

"I..." began Chabashira-sensei.

"Don't hesitate. Promise me right now that you'll be cold, like before," said Hoshinomiya-sensei. "If you can't do that, then don't ever talk to me again."

"But if we can't talk to you, and if I see you committing some kind of violation, I will have to report it to our superiors. If that happens, you might be removed from your position as a homeroom teacher, you understand?" said Sakagami-sensei.

Even Sakagami-sensei's words, which showed that he had no intention of overlooking anything, didn't seem to make Hoshinomiyasensei back down.

"Even so, I won't mind," answered Hoshinomiya-sensei. "I won't commit any kind of violation, of course. I will just struggle desperately until the end in my own way, and if something inconvenient for me is disclosed to our superiors, then I will resign myself to my fate and accept being ousted."

That wasn't a threat, but simply her true feelings. I could imagine several reasons. First, Hoshinomiya-sensei didn't believe it necessary to be overly concerned with the other teachers in the first place. The only reason she continued to teach was simply to obstruct Chabashira-sensei, and if she could accomplish that, she didn't care if it led to her being dismissed from her position. Her focus on her goal meant that she could tolerate that risk.

"I see. Your resolve appears to be genuine, but..." Sakagami paused for a moment. "I don't understand. Now that we have a grasp on the situation, any cheap attempts to commit fraudulent activity will be quickly detected, so it is extremely unlikely that anything you do will be beneficial to the class you are in charge of, even if you do something reckless. On top of that, your students will most definitely be shaken if it gets out that their homeroom teacher behaved so improperly, and... Yes, I see."

Sakagami-sensei seemed to have wrapped his mind around Hoshinomiya-sensei's stance as he was voicing his doubts. It would be ideal if she could help her class through cheating without being noticed, but if that were not possible, she was prepared to self-destruct spectacularly. If Hoshinomiya-sensei were to commit some fraudulent act and be removed from her position as homeroom teacher, Ichinose's class would lose sight of trying to rise up, and at the same time, Chabashira-sensei would be wracked with renewed, intense guilt. If that happened, Horikita's class might also be negatively impacted. In fact, Chabashira-sensei seemed to be suffering a heavy emotional load just from the current conversation.

"Chie—"

"I will never allow it," Hoshinomiya-sensei cut Chabashira-sensei off, even more determined that I'd imagined. A half-hearted effort wouldn't shake her resolve or make her give up on this.

"Chabashira-sensei. Would you please give Hoshinomiyasensei a little time?" said Mashima-sensei, breaking his silence to interject. He seemed to be emphasizing that the idea was not coming as a former classmate, but as a homeroom instructor in charge of a class, judging from his use of respectful speech.

"Give her some time?" repeated Chabashira-sensei.

"Yes," Mashima-sensei answered. "Whether Hoshinomiya-sensei makes a decision here or you change her mind, Chabashira-sensei, there is no need for us to reach a conclusion right now. Of course, I thought that it would be best if we did settle things here, but as far as I can tell by looking at the current situation, that would be difficult. Fortunately, however, it is spring vacation right now. You could say that you have sufficient time to organize our thoughts and calm down. In the meantime, a third option may emerge."

Even if it turned out to be futile, it wasn't an unwise decision to postpone this matter until the new semester. Actually, if anything, if they forced things and complicated the issue right here and now, they might end up putting themselves in a situation where they couldn't go back, and there really wouldn't be anything more left to be done. Mashima-sensei was clearly keeping these factors in mind.

"It might be rude of me to offer my opinion as a student, but I agree with Mashima-sensei," I remarked.

For the time being, I was able to equip three teachers with the information and skills to foresee Hoshinomiya-sensei acting reckless. I figured I should be satisfied with that for today.

"Even if you put this matter on hold, I won't change my mind," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"I think it's good to dig your heels in and not change your thinking, but please put the matter on hold, even if only on the surface. There shouldn't be any harm in that, from any perspective. Am I wrong?" asked Mashima-sensei.

Putting the matter on hold should be welcomed not only by the two people directly involved, but by Mashima-sensei and Sakagamisensei, as well as the students who would be greatly affected by the issue.

"Well... I suppose that much is fine," conceded Hoshinomiyasensei.

"In that case, this discussion is over. We are hereby dismissed," said Mashima-sensei.

If they stayed here too long, another argument was likely to break out. Sakagami-sensei took the initiative and made for the entrance. After having heard what Mashima-sensei had to say, the rest of us left the room. I was sure that Mashima-sensei wanted to know about Akiyama-san, but I figured that he couldn't bring himself to ask in that atmosphere. I would have to tell him about her at a later date. Sakagami-sensei and Mashima-sensei were on the same floor, so as soon as we parted ways, I got onto the elevator. When I pushed the button for the first floor, Chabashira-sensei followed me in.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't help you, even though you confided in me and came to me to talk," said Chabashira-sensei.

"That's not true. You were plenty helpful," I replied.

"Even though we couldn't solve the problem right away, I strongly appreciate that you had the courage to tell me about it." Chabashirasensei forced a smile, but it was clear that she was worn out both mentally and physically.

"I think I've found a means of survival through this conversation today," I told her.

"A means of survival?" she repeated after a moment.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression, as if she couldn't imagine that possibility.

"I don't think that you would take any action that would disqualify you as a mentor out of consideration for Hoshinomiya-sensei, but please keep a firm and strong heart. It is important that you enter the new semester as a student who has overcome her past with the Unanimous Special Exam," I told her.

"Well, yes, that's, um, I suppose, but..."

The elevator arrived on the first floor and the doors opened. I turned back toward Chabashira-sensei, who remained in the elevator as I took a step forward.

"You don't have to worry. I'll change Hoshinomiya-sensei's mind before spring vacation is over," I told her as I started to leave the elevator.

"You're going to change—?" she asked as she hurriedly tried to exit the elevator after me. "What are you saying?"

From a teacher's point of view, I simply got swept up by fate. She

probably thought that this wasn't a problem that could be dealt with by a mere student in the first place, but that wasn't the case. Hoshinomiyasensei's problem was actually remarkably simple, and the solution was an easy one. This could have been solved without even calling on Chabashira-sensei, Mashima-sensei, or Sakagami-sensei. However, that wouldn't have been sufficient, which was why I had deliberately decided to take this step.

"By the end of the spring vacation, definitely," I said. "Well, then, I'll bid you farewell for today."

"You are... What in the world are you going to..." stammered Chabashira-sensei.

The lingering image of a bewildered Chabashira-sensei remained in my mind for a while after the elevator doors closed.

Chapter 6: Illusion

March 30, an especially important day, had arrived. It was also the day that I had promised to take Kei out on a date to see a movie that she'd been wanting to see. After checking to see if a certain person had read a message or not, I opened my chat with Kei. Then, I scrolled a bit back to a previous conversation.

"I got reservations for seats for the movie that you wanted to take me to on March 30. Is around ten on that day okay?"

That was my message to Kei.

"Of course! I'm super excited for it!" was her innocent, simpleminded response.

The movie had come out a little while ago, on the twenty-sixth, but I had to delay seeing it due to a number of things: the end of the End-of-Year Special Exam, the matter of Hoshinomiya-sensei, my personal thoughts, and so on. I had turned on the television early in the morning, and once the long morning news program ended, there were some characters playing rock-paper-scissors toward the screen.

I casually watched it, and soon after, a commercial for the movie I was going to go see started playing. It was the third commercial for it since I'd turned the set on. I could see how much effort that they put into this film. Kei wanted to sit in the fifth row from the front. Our seats were the two that were in the exact middle of the entire auditorium. Apparently, she couldn't settle down if she were too far toward the front or back, and she preferred to watch movies from the middle row.

It would have been simple if we had gone together from the dormitory, but Kei apparently wanted to enjoy the vibe of a real date, so she purposefully asked to meet me out in front of the theater instead. Was that what they meant when they referred to a maiden's heart or something? Normally, it should've been a day that was topped off by a little bit of bliss between lovers, however...

Today, after we finished enjoying the movie, I was going to tell Kei that we were breaking up.

I'd been planning this since I started dating Karuizawa Kei a year ago.

The horrific abuse that she had suffered during her junior high school days had cast a looming shadow over her life. Unlike adults, students have to survive in the small world of school. Technically speaking, she could have escaped at any time, but it's not like everyone can make that choice. Often, your only option would be to face the solitude and despair and continue to fight. Kei, with her past rooted in such a harsh environment, had to change her way of life when she entered high school.

She sharpened her survival instincts and thought about how she could avoid repeating the same mistakes. She learned how to latch on to a stronger individual and survive by making herself look bigger and stronger. She chose to parasitize Yousuke Hirata, who was warmly revered at the top of the class.

The choice of host was vital to a parasite. No matter how strong, if the host did not allow parasitism, the parasite would be eliminated. It was a coincidence that Yousuke just so happened to have a savior complex, and it could be said that this made him the best partner for Kei. However, Kei was once again put to the test.

Manabe, Yabu, Yamashita, and Morofuji from Ryuuen's class had learned about Kei's experience of being bullied. If she had been left alone, it was highly likely that Kei would've fallen into darkness once again, but I had reached out to her and managed to save her. Though she took some risks, this time, she had become a parasite to me. Although, it would be more accurate to say that I had guided her into parasitizing me. That was because I thought that, if I could manipulate Kei, who was enjoying the upper echelon in Horikita's class, it would be convenient for me in many aspects of my life at school in the future.

However, my school life experience began to change even my thinking, little by little. I began to think not only about making use of my surroundings but also about promoting growth of the students in the process. And it didn't just have to be my classmates, like Horikita and Yousuke, but those in the other classes, like Ryuuen's and Ichinose's classes. Kei was nothing more than just one of those students.

Being a parasite and latching onto someone else was not the only way for her to survive. If she could break the spell and stand on her own, she could grow in a big way as a human being. The alignment in our interests would be clear to anyone. In exchange for giving Kei a chance to grow, I would learn from her. Namely, to know the opposite sex, to know love, and to know parting.

I would soon reach the final page of the textbook on romantic love that I had been reading.

Of course, Kei, who felt safe as long as she was a parasite, would probably not welcome such a favor. There was no guarantee whatsoever that she would survive after being forcibly removed from her host. I had my predictions for next year, but there was no way to be absolutely certain. It was up to an individual whether they could make the right decision in the end. When you fail, that's when you fail.

Kei had the makings, but she couldn't blossom into a real person on her own. That was all there was to it. Would she choose to stop attending class, voluntarily drop out of school, or reject the world itself? There were several cruel outcomes that I could conceive of, but that's what made every choice both vital and interesting. Dead or alive. Today, the battle for Kei's survival was going to begin.

But just as I was about to make my way to the front entrance, I couldn't take that first step. A foreign contaminant was mixed in my thoughts.

"It's just—"

Yes, that's right. Even so, that didn't mean that I wouldn't give it any consideration. Namely, that this long process of love over this past year had produced some unexpected byproduct. I wondered if I would feel some strange new emotion over the idea of dumping Karuizawa Kei. Would my thoughts be shaped by the time we spent as lovers?

Even though I had a premonition that nothing would come of it, I hoped that my instincts would prove incorrect. It might change at the very last moment, when I was face-to-face with the person in question.

No, I was hoping it would change. I had a strong feeling of wanting to disprove my thoughts and future predictions. There was not a definite future for everything.

I pondered whether I could really say goodbye to Kei. I was convinced that I could, but I hesitated, and I wondered if there was any

possibility that I could embrace her. I was hoping, hoping that there was an incalculable emotion within me. Even in this moment, on this day that I had decided would be the last, I was praying for that.

I took that step and left my dorm so that I wouldn't be late for my date.

6.1

I was greeted by her bubbly smile. If I were a normal male student, I'm sure that the corners of my mouth would have reflexively lifted.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka!" she exclaimed.

Keyaki Mall had just opened at ten o'clock in the morning. Kei, who had been waiting for me already at the designated meeting place, waved to me and beckoned me over. From the looks of it, she was no different from usual, but that made total sense. I had only just one-sidedly decided that we would break up; there was no way that Kei would know about that. However, was it possible that she had sensed that something was off?

I took that possibility into account as I got ready to head out, little by little. Even so, it was unclear if that uneasy feeling was present with Kei as she stood before me today. As soon as we met up, her smile changed to a dejected look, and she placed her hand on her stomach.

"I haven't eaten anything since this morning, so I'm starving," said Kei.

"You're the same as ever, I see," I replied. "You should have at least eaten a little."

"I can't help it!" she protested. "It's because I tend to eat way, way too much popcorn without thinking when I watch movies."

While it wasn't like we went to the movie theater very frequently before now, I did have a grasp on what Kei's tastes were like. She always got a big bucket, half salt and half caramel, and then ate too much of the caramel, leaving me to eat a lot of the salty popcorn. Then, we would put about half of the leftover popcorn in a clear plastic bag,

close it lightly, and take it back to the dorms. Later, we would eat it while watching television and talking about how it just wasn't as delicious when it wasn't fresh. You could say that was our routine, our established custom when we went to the movies. As soon as we were side by side, she took my hand. It was a little cold out, but my hand suddenly heated up and became warm.

"Shall we?" said Kei.

Kei must have been feeling impatient, because instead of waiting for me to take the initiative, she started pulling me along, almost a half step ahead of me.

"Has anyone been condemning you or anything because of me?" I asked.

"Huh? Why?" asked Kei. "Was there something people would blame us for?"

"Because I'm responsible for Maezono getting expelled. I was worried whether you'd get mixed up in it," I explained.

"Oh, no, not at all. There hasn't been any of that," said Kei.

She wasn't just saying that to cover for me; she answered without hesitation. Apparently, it really didn't seem to have any effect on Kei.

"But..."

"But?"

After pondering for a little bit, Kei said, "I wonder if maybe the kids who misunderstand you—or, like, don't quite understand you, rather—are slowly starting to realize that maybe things aren't the way you said they are. Some of them are even saying things like you might have gotten Maezono-san expelled on purpose to punish her for her betrayal and stuff."

That wasn't surprising. After all, Kushida noticed it immediately. It was just a matter of how much a student could read into things, and it was natural that some of them would come to that conclusion.

"I see. What do you think, Kei?" I asked.

"About whether you got Maezono-san expelled on purpose or not?" she asked in return.

"Yeah," I replied with another question, out of genuine curiosity.

"Well, I guess I think..." she trailed off for a moment before

answering properly. "It might have been intentional, yeah."

"And what's your basis for that?" I asked.

"Because you've got enough power to win, no matter who you're up against, Kiyotaka. Besides, spending time with you has taught me how to think. If you got Maezono-san expelled, it means that you had some other goal aside from winning, right? In that case, it'd probably be something like, well, making her pay the price for betraying the class, or something. Still, it's pretty shocking when someone gets kicked out of school, right? So, like, I was thinking that regardless of what your abilities or intentions were, Kiyotaka, you had, like, painted over that shock. I wondered if it was a camouflage to keep people from realizing the truth at the same time."

Kei responded with her own summary of what happened, not particularly bothered by any of it. Like Kushida, her guess as to what I was after was adequate. However, the instant I was about to evaluate her, Kei looked at my face and told me to wait.

"No, wait, I think there might be a little more. I thought that my guess before was pretty much right, but, like... For example, if Ichinosesan were a stronger opponent than I thought she'd be, maybe you used Maezono-san as a surefire move to make your 99 percent chance of winning into a 100 percent chance. Or maybe you were looking beyond just this one time, and you, like, wanted to thoroughly beat her in this exam."

I would have given her only seventy points for her first answer, but that added more points to her score.

"I guessed right, didn't I?" asked Kei.

I wasn't aware of my facial expression changing or anything, but the look Kei gave me said that she was convinced she was correct. Since we had arrived at the movie theater just in time, I quickly took care of picking up our tickets, which I had booked in advance.

"I'm honestly impressed. Your answer was closer to the mark than anyone else's in class," I replied.

"I was right after all?! Heh heh! Well, it's okay for you to be even more impressed with me." She giggled and put her hands on her waist triumphantly, acting like it was only a matter of course she got it. "Come to think of it, yeah. I think that my anxieties might have disappeared too."

"Anxieties?" I asked.

"You know, about Ichinose-san. You were being, like, super suspicious. I was kinda wondering if you were going to go easy on her when you were fighting each other."

"Oh, I get it. You didn't say anything, though."

"Well, if I had the wrong idea, then I'm not going to hound you over it anymore. But, y'know, I thought you made a really, really conspicuous move this time around."

"It was an undeniably conspicuous action, but thankfully it didn't attract as much attention as I had anticipated."

"Yeah. The fact that Sakayanagi-san's expulsion from school was at stake and Class A lost behind the scenes is, like, major. It was hard to say anything about Maezono-san's expulsion, so it felt like all the talking shifted to the topic of other classes instead. Ever since that day we had that discussion, not a day goes by that I don't hear about it."

Taking that into consideration, the teachers who helped me with the matter of Hoshinomiya-sensei were admirable. Especially Mashimasensei, who, despite looking like he was terribly depressed about the demotion of his class and the withdrawal of his leader, never showed the slightest hint of that in his behavior toward his students.

"You really didn't show any mercy to Ichinose-san, huh?" added Kei.

The conversation should have moved along to another topic, but Kei once again dragged it back to Ichinose.

"Didn't you say you weren't going to hound me too deeply about it?" I asked. "What's with that suspicious look in your eyes?"

"Nothiiiiing?" said Kei, squinting at me with a teasing look in her eyes.

However, that look soon gave way to a smirk. Apparently she was quite pleased that I had crushed Ichinose in earnest.

"It's natural to take things seriously for the sake of the class, right?" I asked.

"Whoa, that totally smells like BS!" said Kei. "I think there's *definitely* something behind it because that's your thing, Kiyotaka."

Brilliant, once again. She didn't seem to know what exactly I was

after, of course, but she had guessed that there were other factors at play. We went to the concessions counter, bought popcorn as planned, and got two combos with oolong tea.

"I'm excited for the movie," said Kei.

"I bet," I replied, and handed our tickets over to the clerk.

As Kei and I were having that exchange, the student in front of us turned around, probably because she recognized our voices.

"Ugh, Ayanokouji and Karuizawa!" she exclaimed.

The person making a face of open disdain was none other than Ibuki. She walked away as though she were trying to escape, but it soon became clear that we were headed to the same screening room.

"Wait, are we seeing the same movie? Ugh, you suck..." she groaned.

I don't think there's any reason for you to treat me like the worst person ever just because we're seeing the same movie, though.

Ibuki, after hurling abuse my way, hurriedly opened the doors to the auditorium and disappeared inside.

"What was that about?" asked Kei.

"Who knows?" I replied. "We don't need to worry about it, do we?"

Kei and I exchanged looks before we entered the auditorium ourselves and made our way to the middle of the fifth row.

"Ugh," spat the person one seat over. "Why the hell are you two sitting *here* of all places?!"

Apparently, Ibuki's seat was next to Kei's. Which meant that Ibuki, Kei, and I were all seated in a row.

"Hey, who are you to talk? I don't even care who got the seat next to me. Right?" said Kei, turning to me.

"Right," I replied.

The chemistry between Ibuki and me wasn't good, but the vibe was even worse between Kei and Ibuki. That was only natural, since Ibuki had been one of the people who made Kei suffer such a terrible experience last year. Even so, I supposed that Kei was just letting bygones be bygones with a magnanimous heart, since she wasn't saying

anything about that incident herself.

"I guess you must like movies too, Ibuki-san," remarked Kei, perhaps because she would feel bad if she didn't at least try to say something to her.

"Whatever. I just happened to come," said Ibuki. Then she looked in the other direction and grumbled, "Why don't you just leave me alone?"

"Okay, fine. Oh, but if you want, you can have some popcorn. Want some?" asked Kei.

"No," Ibuki answered shortly. "Don't need any."

Not only was Ibuki not looking at us, but she was even looking away from the screen, which must have been making her neck uncomfortable.

"By the way, how come Sakayanagi-san couldn't identify the traitor in her class, anyway?" wondered Kei.

"What? What the hell're you askin' me that for all of the sudden?" snarled Ibuki. "You can just ask the idiot next to you."

"'Cause I'm not asking him. I'm asking you, Ibuki-san," Kei replied.

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me?" asked Ibuki, turning to show us an annoyed expression.

Kei laughed, teasing the fidgety Ibuki. I'm sure that there must've been some pent-up feelings deep down that she hadn't processed yet. However, the fact that Kei was able to act so naturally around Ibuki, ignoring those pent-up feelings, was probably because she had gained strength of mind, and because time had given her resolution and composure.

"How the hell would I know? Do *you* know?" asked Ibuki, looking past Kei to glare directly at me.

"No idea. It was a test where we couldn't check on other classes. There's no way I would know," I answered.

"Yeah..."

Since Sakayanagi hadn't said anything to anyone about the message that I gave through Hashimoto, the only information anyone else had is that Sakayanagi didn't identify the traitor and lost, so that

was getting spread around and picked apart. When I met with Morishita and Yamamura, I casually asked them about the situation with respect to that issue, and they told me that Hashimoto has still been sitting in class with a nonchalant look of innocence on his face, even though his classmates are pointing fingers at him behind his back. That's because the traitor acting in such a way that they would not be detected by the representative was in accordance with the rules, after all. Which meant that it was purely Sakayanagi's fault for failing to detect him. That discussion out of the way, the three of us quietly stared at the screen as the trailers began to play.

6.2

AFTER THE MOVIE was over and Kei and I watched the entirety of the end credits, we both left the theater, hand in hand. The movie hadn't exceeded my expectations, perhaps because the film's catchphrase, "It will change the history of Japanese cinema," was far too strong, but it was still passably interesting. By the way, the person next to us who had been glaring at me for a long time left in the middle of the end credits. I figured that she utterly detested the idea of leaving at the same time as Kei and me. If possible, I had wanted to ask her about her impressions of the film, but oh well.

Then, I looked over at my significant other with a sidelong glance as we walked together, our fingers intertwined. She was beautiful even in profile. Her gaze was directed straight ahead, her attention focused on the cell phone in her hand. Time passed slowly. As we moved forward step-by-step, my thoughts unexpectedly wandered. We had met up on a day off, sat down next to one another, and happily watched a movie together. It was the typical kind of date that you could find anywhere in the world.

Although it was an orthodox choice, it was strange when you really took the time to think about it. Movie screenings were generally around two hours long, give or take, and 99 percent of that time was spent looking at the screen instead of conversing with your partner. If lovers looked at one another during a memorable scene, they might happen to make eye contact or whisper into each other's ears on rare

occasion, but most of the time, they would be concentrating on the film. Depending on how you looked at it, those two hours were spent with the partners not interacting directly with each other.

I wondered why, despite that, this has become the established standard for dates. I understood that if you had just started going out, or if you weren't officially dating yet, there wasn't any need to force a conversation, and that it was easy to use the movie as a date idea because you could use it as a shared topic of conversation afterward. However, for couples who were already familiar with one another and were in love, there should be no need for that, and yet it was still one of the standard date activities.

I thought that was rather strange. Even though I had a myriad of questions about movie dates, the real appeal of it was that it provided an easy, shared conversation topic.

"Well, if you asked me if the movie was interesting, I'd say yeah, it was fun, but I think it would've been better if we hadn't set the bar too high when we went in. How was it for you, Kiyotaka?" asked Kei.

"I feel the same about that high bar, but even accounting for that, it wasn't bad. Actually, I'd say it leaned more toward being an enjoyable watch," I replied.

A movie date is partly a test for the person who gave the invitation, to show off what kind of eye they have for movies. If the movie was interesting enough to discuss, even if it wasn't a perfect score, that was something to be plenty happy about.

"I see," she said. "I'm glad. By the way, which part did you find interesting? Personally, I..."

My mind wandered as she kept chatting. We had spent much of our private time together in this small, cramped school life, which was why we could expand the conversation in many ways if we had a topic to start from. If there was no movie to talk about, we could talk about yesterday or today. Or we could talk about last month or half a year ago, or even about next year.

What you couldn't talk about with family or friends, you could talk about with a partner. If I were to let myself wax sentimental about it, I could say that the time was irreplaceable—most definitely not a waste. Still holding hands the whole time, the two of us then headed to karaoke in Keyaki Mall. This was another one of those features of

typical dates. As soon as we entered the establishment, we sat close together on the wide sofa. Then we proceeded to scramble for the microphone, press it against our faces, and sing our favorite songs, both solos and duets.

We've had this kind of date many times now, over and over. They were happy times, without a doubt, and it was only natural to wish for it to last forever.

It would be fine if it went on forever.

That wasn't just my own self-centered feeling. I'm sure that my partner felt the same. It should never end.

A bright future that went on forever.

Still, before we knew it, the two of us found ourselves together in silence. Although we were supposed to have been nuzzling up against each other and feeling each other's body heat, there was instead a sensation of cooling down somehow. That was the signal. The distance between us had grown, and the time had come. Emotions that had been hidden inside the heart for a long time were what separated the two of us. My thoughts went to that as I followed this person's gaze.

It had already been decided long ago that words of farewell would be said aloud soon. While I was busy fighting with the feeling of wanting to resist it, this day had arrived—the time of destiny. With that looming ahead, I couldn't help but feel like I was going to break out in an unpleasant sweat.

I couldn't believe it myself. I was confused. Despite the fact that I've traversed this kind of harsh battlefield many times before now, it was the first time for this: A violent, steady throbbing that I had never once felt before at all, let alone in any of the situations like this. As that time drew near, an incredible sense of regret washed over me. What in the world is this? I wondered. I was embarrassed at myself for being so calm and composed up until just moments ago. I had thought that those words of farewell would be easy to say.

I could see that it wasn't an easy task at all.

Yes, that's right.

I was able to realize, right on the verge.

True feelings.

I don't want to break up.

I didn't want to break up with the girl before me.

I realized that.

I like you.

That feeling began to well up from the very bottom of my heart, without warning.

Until now, I had hardly noticed it.

Their charms.

Their face, voice, body—everything was lovely.

Their adorable mannerisms that I hadn't seen, even though I thought I was looking.

My voice wasn't coming out.

Let's break up.

Even though I had planned to just toss those words out when the time came.

One more time.

Once again, I tried to speak.

I looked them in the eyes and tried to force out those words: "Let's break up."

I couldn't.

And I understood.

I wondered exactly when they had become a truly precious person.

This was love. There was no way I could have said it, from the very beginning.

That was because I knew that actually, I had really loved them, for a long time...

Yes. I'm gl—

"Let's break up."

That's right.

The two of us felt the same way.

If we each knew that we were thinking of each other, we would be fine.

They are thinking about me.

Up until yesterday, today, tomorrow, or next year.

Words like farewell would never come.

There was no way something like that could happen...

"I" always believed that.

But all of these thoughts were just delusions.

It was just a wish, that I wanted things to be this way.

Cold, inhuman eyes were looking at me.

The slow movement of his lips as he said, "Let's break up."

I don't understand what he's thinking. No, that's not right. I don't want to know.

"Do we have to?"

I couldn't believe how calmly those words came out of my throat. While the karaoke booth we occupied remained quiet, in the next room, someone was enthusiastically belting out an anime song.

"Yes. I'm not looking to discuss whether we should or shouldn't. Let's just end this whole relationship right here and now," answered Kiyotaka, saying those cruel words with the same look on his face that he always had.

"I-I see..." I replied.

I was thirsty.

I wanted to drink some water.

But my body just wouldn't move.

All I could manage to do was force an insincere, ingratiating smile, pretending that it didn't affect me.

"You don't seem surprised," said Kiyotaka.

When did I start liking him? I wondered. I couldn't recall the exact moment.

"Somehow, I guess, I just, I knew. At least, I knew that your feelings were distant," I replied.

No, that's not true. I didn't know. I had suspected that Kiyotaka didn't have any feelings for me at all, from the very beginning. Any measure of love and affection between us was always one-sided. I had only fully realized that recently, but I probably already knew it deep down. That Kiyotaka had never once loved me. I had just continued to pretend that I was unaware of that.

Then, why did he go out with me? I wasn't going to ask him that question. I knew what Kiyotaka was thinking. Half of it was for my sake, and half of it was for himself, but it wasn't a choice between left or right; Kiyotaka always took his own ideas as absolute. Which was why this must have been decided at the very beginning. It was just like how Cinderella's magic was broken at midnight, no matter what she did. The time when my relationship with Kiyotaka would end had been decided from the start.

It was just that the time had finally come. I really, really wanted to bawl my eyes out, cling onto him, and say I'd do anything. I wanted to plead that I would do whatever he wanted. Most likely, that's what the me from a little while ago would have done, but not now. I couldn't. Because even just resisting would have betrayed Kiyotaka's expectations.

"Is it necessary for me to explain why?" he asked, and pulled out his phone for some reason.

"No, that's okay," I replied. I wasn't able to think straight, but I managed to maintain my smile as I shook my head from side to side.

"All right," said Kiyotaka as he put his phone away. "Sorry I didn't live up to your expectations."

"It's okay. I kinda had, um, well, a feeling like... To be honest, I was feeling like, well, things were a little, um, heavy."

I put on a false show of courage, continuing to pretend that everything was fine. What I said wasn't true. My heart had always been with Kiyotaka. Like today, I had been trying to enjoy myself as much as I possibly could, so that I could forget my anxieties. Even at this moment, I wished I could tell him that I was lying, and that I wanted

him to hold me, but there was a reason I was putting up a tough front like this.

"That might be so," answered Kiyotaka in a matter-of-fact tone, as though he were talking to a stranger.

"I guess it's just, like, um...how do I put it? It's like our romance has kinda cooled off, like we're not in love anymore. I mean, I don't especially dislike you or anything, Kiyotaka. It's just, well, maybe we could get along better if we went back to being, you know, friends."

You can't even imagine just how much courage I'm mustering right now as I'm talking to you, can you? I thought. No matter how much I could feel Kiyotaka's cold, hard emotions close to me, I pretended not to notice.

"Yeah. Going back to being just friends would be the most natural thing," said Kiyotaka.

"Yeah, I figured. I kinda... I mean, had the vague idea that we'd have to do that, and, uh..." I replied, nodding my head as I muttered. "Yeah, yeah..."

No... No, not like this. At this rate, we'll...

"Thanks for everything," I added.

It had ended. With a big, foolish smile on my face, that I myself didn't even understand. This last moment was about to come to an end.

"If people ask you why we broke up, you can just say that you were the one who dumped me. That's fine," said Kiyotaka.

"Oh? Are you sure? Don't you think that might be a little embarrassing, though?" I asked.

"It's fine," he replied. "Of course, you can give any reason you want. I don't care. If anyone asks me, I intend to tell them that I was dumped."

Then don't say that you're breaking up with me! Please, stay with me, forever and ever. Say that... Say that we'll always be with each other and—

"See you later. Karuizawa."

I reacted with a start for just a moment when he called me by my last name. From friends to lovers. From lovers to just friends. Regressing meant that everything that has happened until now had to be rewound, right? Kiyotaka, holding the slip for the cashier, got up and left the

room. Without looking back at all.

He showed no hesitation. He wasn't stopping. The door he opened was immediately closed behind him, and I was left all alone.

"See..." I began.

I gulped unconsciously, swallowing my saliva. I didn't want to say these words, but I had to spit them out...

"See... See you later. Ayanokouji...kun..." I muttered.

The person I was smiling and waving at was no longer in sight, but that was fine. Because this was what Kiyotaka wanted, right? For me, who couldn't live without relying on someone else, to learn how to live alone.

I'm not much of a big deal as a person, but there are things that only I can do. I can at least read your feelings somewhat, which no one else can understand, right?

That's right, isn't it?

Hey...

Even if I wished for a miracle, it wasn't going to open a closed door. In that silent space, I crumbled, all alone.

I wonder if I did a good job in front of you, until the end?

Was I able to show you that I can stand on my own two feet?

Kiyotaka...

Help me...



Chapter 7: Even After Graduation

EARLY IN THE MORNING, I returned to my room in the dormitory to check my phone and noticed that I had received numerous calls and messages from Satou. Of course, I had been expecting that development, since Karuizawa had almost certainly shared the fact that she and I had broken up. As I had hoped she would, Karuizawa had decided to say that she was the one who dumped me, probably because she knew it would be troublesome later if our reports on the situation didn't line up.

However, Karuizawa's best friend seemed convinced that she would never have wanted to break up with me, and that I must have been the one who initiated the breakup, so she contacted me, urging me to take Karuizawa back. However, even Satou knew. She knew that romantic relationships were basically something that were decided only by the people in that relationship, and there was extraordinarily little that any outsider could do about it. Even so, I couldn't blame her for her feelings, for not being able to stop herself from meddling.

As I left the dormitory and headed for the main gates, I looked back not at the thread with Satou from yesterday, but at a different message, which I had received after the End-of-Year Special Exam, just to be sure. It read, "Ryuuen-kun has granted me permission to remain at school for a little while. There is still so much to talk about. I think I will be out in front of the main gate on March 31, the day that I leave this school."

In response to Sakayanagi's message, I replied back only that I understood and would be there at a specific time. This was my own personal speculation, but I suspected that Sakayanagi was making use of her valuable remaining time, wrapping up loose ends, including matters related to her class.

Sakayanagi was going to leave the school at eleven in the morning in a reserved taxi, and I had planned to meet with her before that.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

When I arrived, about ten minutes earlier than planned, I found Sakayanagi already waiting. To be clear, it was not Arisu, but her father, Chairman Sakayanagi, standing there instead.

"Good morning," I greeted him. "Are you seeing your daughter off, by chance?"

"My dear daughter is starting a new chapter, after all," the chairman nodded in his usual calm manner. "Did you come to see her off too, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Yes. Well, technically, I had an appointment with her at ten thirty. You don't seem shocked, Chairman," I replied.

"Hmm? Oh, well, no, I suppose not. I had received a report from her homeroom instructor, Mashima-sensei, before the special exam, so I was mentally prepared," said Chairman Sakayanagi. "Still, at the time, it came as a great surprise, but that girl's decision must be respected. Of course, the fact that she would be making trouble for her friends in class due to her voluntary withdrawal from school is unfortunate. However, it would be wrong for me, the current chairman, to personally intervene, wouldn't you say?"

Of course, a chairman could have annulled the bet if he had utilized his authority. It would've been simple for him to put a stop to the whole thing. If he did that, however, he would break the school's rules.

"That is commendable," I answered.

Honestly, I had a deep respect for his actions and behavior, which were a credit to his position. After flashing a somewhat embarrassed smile, Chairman Sakayanagi's expression suddenly turned serious.

"I know that this isn't really the place to talk about this, but I hear that your father is coming for the parent–teacher meetings," said Chairman Sakayanagi.

"It sounds like it. What kind of curious turn of events led to that happening?" I asked.

"He is someone who never acts without reason. I think that he wanted to meet in person to see for himself what kind of growth you've undergone, and what kind of future you have in mind."

Chairman Sakayanagi sounded somewhat pleased as he said that, although I knew that this was unlikely to be the case. If he were simply checking in on me, there were many ways he could do it. However, I did agree with the part about that man not doing anything without reason.

"If by some chance you run into some trouble, I want you to rely on me," he added.

"Thank you very much," I replied. "That's reassuring."

Chairman Sakayanagi then proceeded to let out a sigh.

"Is that about my father?" I asked.

"No, I was thinking about Arisu," Chairman Sakayanagi answered. "To be honest, there's been some unexpected trouble. Arisu has been accepted to a high school near our home for her transfer, which is good, but she had made an additional irksome request."

"An irksome request?" I asked.

"Perhaps you could be the one to convince her to reconsider," Chairman Sakayanagi said with a wry smile, looking like he was about to share that request with me.

"That won't do, Father," came Sakayanagi's voice. "What are you discussing with Ayanokouji-kun, and without my permission?"

"Oh, uh, Arisu," stammered Chairman Sakayanagi, blatantly shocked and breaking out into a cold sweat.

Sakayanagi appeared, cane in hand, but without a single piece of hand luggage on her. Beside her were Yamamura and Morishita, who had likely come to see her off, as her classmates.

"Oh, well, it's, um... It's nothing," stammered Chairman Sakayanagi.

"If that is indeed the case, then that is good. I ask you once again: Do not make any unsolicited remarks," said Sakayanagi.

Apparently, his daughter had previously forbidden him from saying anything.

"Ha ha, w-well, yes," Chairman Sakayanagi replied, "I suppose we can talk about it at our leisure after we get back home today. That would be good."

"Yes, I am sure that we will have an enjoyable conversation as parent and child," said Sakayanagi.

Chairman Sakayanagi had a wry, forced smile on his face. Apparently, they had been keeping a certain level of distance between them until now as chairman and student, but it looked like that wasn't necessary anymore. "This may be tactless to ask, but where is your home located, Sakayanagi Arisu?" asked Morishita.

Morishita let loose a question that had no thought behind it, which seemed to shift the atmosphere over all of us. It was true that matter was a little curious, come to think of it. The teachers lived in the dormitories, but what about the chairman?

"We live about a fifteen-minute drive from the school grounds. One bus ride away," said Sakayanagi.

"That is so close!" exclaimed Morishita immediately.

Taking only distance into account, it was just a stone's throw away. Of course, the students residing at this school were not allowed to leave the premises, except under exceptional circumstances such as traveling for club activities and such, so it wasn't possible for anyone to just casually go pay her a visit.

"There is plenty of time before my taxi arrives. May I speak with Ayanokouji-kun for a moment, in private, please?" asked Sakayanagi.

Her request prompted the chairman, Yamamura, and Morishita to nod and move far enough away that they wouldn't be able to hear our conversation.

"I didn't expect that Yamamura and Morishita would be seeing you off," I remarked.

"If this happened earlier, I suppose it would have been Masumisan, Hashimoto-kun, and Kitou-kun," she replied.

Kamuro had been expelled and Hashimoto had betrayed her. As for Kitou, he didn't seem to be the type of person to appear solemn and moved during a farewell, so it looked like no one close to Sakayanagi was going to come.

"I have spent only a short time with Yamamura-san, but we have managed to become close in that short time, thanks in part to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

Yet now they were being pulled apart because of me.

"And Morishita?" I asked.

"It would appear that she has been clinging tightly to Yamamurasan," said Sakayanagi.

In other words, she had invited herself along.

"Morishita-san has never been one to be friendly with anyone in particular, but recently, it seems that she has been intentionally trying to get closer to Yamamura-san. She is a clever and perceptive student, and I believe she is concerned about the future of the class, in her own way," said Sakayanagi.

"That may be so," I replied.

Morishita had an incredibly unusual personality, but I sensed that she also had extraordinary talent. I think that my calling up both Morishita and Yamamura a while ago and talking to them may have had an influence too.

"Well, then, I suppose today will be the last time that I will talk to you for a while, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"Seems so."

Sakayanagi, staring up at me intently, then spoke without restraint.

"It would appear that you were dissatisfied with me as your opponent, but as a result, things have turned out the way you wanted. Do you feel a little guilty for having intervened in my match? Please tell me how you feel right now," said Sakayanagi.

"I do feel guilty...is what I would like to say, but I don't think that such superficial lies would work on you," I replied.

What she was hoping for here were my real intentions. Sakayanagi smiled happily, as if saying, "Yes, that's exactly right."

"If I may be so bold, I'd have to say that you were just too strong," I answered. "I don't doubt your abilities, and although I don't know the details of what happened during the End-of-Year Special Exam, you definitely should have surpassed Ryuuen. It's just—"

"Ryuuen-kun. Horikita-san, and Ichinose-san too," Sakayanagi said. "There is still significant room for them to grow, even if no one can predict what kind of person they will turn into."

"That's right. I would like to see that," I replied.

"Just as I thought. Even though I knew the answer, it still hurts to hear it."

"Sorry."

"It's all right. I understand that you are that kind of person.

Besides, it's my own decision to move on, and I can only blame my own excellence for having understood your message."

Of course, even I had no idea what the outcome of the exam would have been. I just thought about whether Ryuuen or Sakayanagi was the person I wanted to stay, and had faith in my message. Ryuuen was free to convey the message or not, and the rest was up to Sakayanagi: Whether it was received, understood, and answered were all up to her. Even so, if I could decipher and analyze Ryuuen's personality and Sakayanagi's thought process, I could see that the chances of this outcome were reasonable.

"I have said many mean-spirited things, but I do not intend to blame you, Ayanokouji-kun," she said. "I just wanted to make things clear about the matter of squaring up our debts."

"Yeah. Personally, if I can take care of things now, I'd like to get it over with," I said. "What do you want?"

I owed Sakayanagi a big debt that needed to be repaid.

"In that case, I have two requests," said Sakayanagi.

I nodded and waited for her to make them, intending to hear her out at the very least.

"First..." she said, pausing to consider it. "Yes. I would like a hot, passionate kiss, right here and now."

She was being mean and spoke of wishes that I couldn't take either seriously or jokingly.

"That's... How am I supposed to take that?" I replied.

As her answer, Sakayanagi took a step closer to me, raised her chin lightly, and closed her eyes. I was honestly too scared to look at the faces of the three people watching us. Just as I was about to double-check whether she was really serious about that request, Sakayanagi slowly opened her eyes.

"Hee hee," she giggled. "That was a joke."

"... A bad one," I replied after a moment.

Inwardly, I let out a sigh of relief. If we were just in front of her classmates, that would be bad enough, but her father, the chairman, was watching us as well.

"Regarding my first request, and I assure you that I am not asking

to be egotistical, but my role is now over, is it not?" Sakayanagi asked.

At those words, I casually turned my attention to the chairman, then immediately back to Sakayanagi.

"You are the person who is always ten or twenty moves ahead. With that in mind, wasn't there some other benefit to be gained by my choosing to voluntarily withdraw from school, aside from keeping Ryuuen-kun here?" asked Sakayanagi.

That was as expected, with Sakayanagi. In terms of strategy and thinking, she could arrive at answers on her own without assistance.

"I had it in mind as a strategic preparatory move for the game. I don't see a future where it will be the case yet, though," I replied.

"Don't worry. I am satisfied just hearing that you are thinking of it as a strategic move," said Sakayanagi.

"I may simply be using you, though."

"Even so," Sakayanagi continued. "I do not wish to lose contact with you. Although this school will cut off my connection with you, I have not given up on fighting you again in the future, Ayanokouji-kun. I intend to undergo trials myself during the coming year so that I may become an even more suitable opponent for you. So please promise me that I will see you again after you leave this school."

"That's your first request?" I asked.

"Yes," said Sakayanagi immediately, without even a moment's pause.

"There are things that are beyond my power, though," I wanted to clarify. "Even so, are you really okay with that request?"

"I will have faith," Sakayanagi answered, more forcefully than before, looking straight ahead.

"I see," I said, after a moment. "If it's you of all people, I may be able to see you once again," I replied.

As I had just told her, there were many things that I couldn't control. Even so, someday, when I myself wished to change the future with my own hands, the promise of a reunion with Sakayanagi could be of immense help.

"Of course, I too am aware of your environment, the White Room. However, right now you are standing here, and your life's path is yours and yours alone to decide. Please do not forget that," said Sakayanagi.

"I suppose so. I hope that the day comes when I can think like that."

That was all I could answer with at this moment, but Sakayanagi nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"And your next request?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, that's right... I was honestly a little worried about the future of my class after my departure, and I thought it would be boorish of me to include this in my wish," said Sakayanagi, prefacing her wish. "It is regarding the matter of dealing with Hashimoto-kun in the future, individually. I have not given any details about him to the class whatsoever."

"There might be other students who suspect Hashimoto because of various matters, but in the absence of conclusive evidence, it's a situation where they have no other choice but to presume him innocent, right?" I replied, prompting a nod from Sakayanagi.

"However, there must be someone who knows what he did, and what he was trying to do, and they can draw conclusions from that. May I entrust you with the task of making that ruling? Do not concern yourself with a deadline."

"In other words, you're asking me to watch over the next year and judge him as innocent or guilty?"

"Yes. The heart within my chest can be both forgiving and unforgiving. I had wanted to walk with him and see how things ended, but that is no longer possible."

If she was leaving everything to me, no matter what judgment I handed down, then there was no reason not to take on the task.

"Got it. I'll play the role of judge," I replied.

"Thank you very much. Well, then, with that in mind, I can go and see Masumi-san," she said.

I was sure that Kamuro would be exasperated before she was delighted, upon reuniting.

"Now then, I suppose it is about time I call the others back over," Sakayanagi said.

"No, before we part, there's something I need to say to you too," I

replied.

With that, I took out my phone and showed Sakayanagi a picture of her that I had taken in my room before. Then, I deleted it, right in front of her eyes.

"I had been holding onto that in case of an emergency, but there's no need for me to use it anymore," I told her.

"Oh, so does that mean you and your girlfriend have already—?" began Sakayanagi.

"Karuizawa herself knew how it would end," I replied, interrupting her.

"I see. If she really does possess a strong will, I am sure she will be independent again."

Because, even if she couldn't stand on her own, Karuizawa had friends that she could rely on.

"Oh, but that reminds me," Sakayanagi said. "That means you have gone back to being a free agent now, doesn't it, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I guess so, yeah," I replied.

"In that case, perhaps I didn't need to refrain from requesting a kiss," teased Sakayanagi as she flashed a wicked grin and slowly opened both hands. "Would it be all right for you to at least give me at least this much, as a farewell present?"

The time for goodbyes was approaching. I also spread both hands and silently pulled Sakayanagi close to me.

"I am left with many feelings of regret, many feelings of still wanting to talk to you, but I suppose it is just right that I am left with those. I will look forward to the day when we can meet once again," said Sakayanagi.

"Yeah," I replied.

My future was currently closed off, but nevertheless, that situation could change. Sakayanagi felt small, yet dependable, in my arms. I was certain that she had a strength that no one else had, out of everyone I knew. In the near future, I could meet Sakayanagi once again, even in the outside world.

I was fully confident in that hunch.



Sakayanagi apologize to her and express her wish to meet once more, those tears overwhelmed her. A close, true friend. For Yamamura, that must have been close to a first. I'm sure that she would have loved to have spent one more year in school together with Sakayanagi. Even so, in the end, Yamamura faced forward and promised that they would meet again.

Morishita didn't seem to envy her two classmates or feel left out but instead seemed to be anxious over the future of her class. After we all saw Sakayanagi off at the front gate, the chairman parted ways with Yamamura, Morishita, and me, and now the three of us were on our way back to the dormitory. Yamamura still had yet to sort out her thoughts and feelings, but I figured that I wasn't going to get a better chance than now to talk to both of these students from the class that was formerly Class A.

"To tell you the truth, when I was talking alone with Sakayanagi, she entrusted me with some important advice for you former Class A students," I began.

"What kind of, um, advice?" asked Yamamura.

I decided to just jump in. I was sure that some students, like Yamamura, would have been happy when they heard the word *advice*, but Morishita was different. Her expression became suspicious as she searched for the meaning of my words.

"Advice? If that is true, then that is a topic that is rather unwelcome. I don't know whether I can honestly listen to what you have to say or not," said Morishita.

"B-but why?" asked Yamamura. "I want to know."

"He said that it is important advice, and that it has something to do with the class. Please think about this calmly, Yamamura Miki," said Morishita. "If such advice ought to be conveyed, then the person delivering the message should not be Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, but rather, the message should be coming directly from someone in our class. Am I wrong? Besides, this is not something to be said right now, at the end, at the very last moment."

"W-well, that's...true, I suppose..." said Yamamura.

"Well, that said, I suppose there is a traitor in our class, yes?" Morishita continued. "Now, supposing for the sake of argument, if this were to prevent information from getting out, I could understand it in that case."

Actually, the advice I was about to give was not something that Sakayanagi asked me to impart but something I was selfishly doing on my own. Not trusting me was a rather perceptive and rational judgment on Morishita's part.

"I know you probably have a lot on your mind, but it's because this is advice that needs to come from me," I answered.

"So you are saying that an intermediary was necessary," said Morishita. "Very well. This is all very suspicious, but I won't know if it is convincing or not unless I hear what you have to say. I shall listen."

Morishita waited for me to speak with her arms folded as I began to explain to her and Yamamura. At first, Morishita listened with a stiff expression on her face, but as I continued, her pupils dilated and she did indeed appear surprised, as expected. Yamamura, on the other hand, just seemed confused, perhaps because it was beyond the realm of her understanding.

"That is the advice left to you by Sakayanagi. About how to fight next year, as the former Class A," I concluded.

"How to fight..." repeated Yamamura. "But could such a thing even be accepted?"

"Whether you accept it or not, I doubt this is the first time it's happened," I replied.

However, those would all be trivial in comparison to what I was suggesting, which would remain significant for the entire year.

"I see. If something like that were to be realized now, in a situation where a turnabout is nearly impossible, then I could see that we might have a chance," said Morishita, understanding and accepting what I had said, although she also understood that unknown developments could well occur.

"How much...more will that increase our chances of winning?" asked Yamamura.

"I had previously stated our chances were 10 percent, but if that were to happen, then those chances would be at least 25 percent," said Morishita. "If we include potential expectations, we may even be able to hope for a higher figure. However, there will likely be inconvenient cases later on, and there are more than a few points of concern. Can we really make such a thing happen?"

I was already working on a plan that would eliminate the primary issue that everyone would be pressing them on. Morishita and Yamamura naturally exchanged looks with one another as I conveyed this bit of supplementary information.

"Then, let us assume that we were able to clear away those concerns. Even so, a major challenge remains," said Morishita.

I nodded in response to that, telling her that I understood, and then proceeded to offer a solution to that particular major challenge. Of course, a solution was just a strategy, and the question of whether they could actually pull it off was a matter for later discussion, but this was only one part of a sequence of events. If any one step were to go wrong, all the rest would be for nothing. After hearing everything I had to say, the first words out of Morishita's mouth were...

"Are you sane?" she asked.

It truly was unbelievable.

"I want to hear your frank opinion," I replied.

"Well, I would say that if this is a real solution, then it would be the best thing we could ask for. It wouldn't be too much trouble to bring together a class that is on the verge of giving up, given the current circumstances," she said.

"L-let's do it... B-because this is advice left to us by none other than Sakayanagi-san..."

Yamamura expressed a willingness to take on the challenge somehow or another, as a friend of Sakayanagi. Morishita, however, thought about it in her head until the last possible moment.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, There is a question that I would like you to answer," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"Is this idea really a parting gift from Sakayanagi Arisu? It is not your own idea?"

"I thought I already told you."

"That was a pointless question on my part," Morishita said, correcting herself. "Sakayanagi Arisu has already left this school, which means there is no longer any way to discern the truth. I apologize, but please allow me to change the question. This advice from Sakayanagi Arisu, or rather, this strategy that you have shown to us former Class A students. What sort of compensation do you receive for acting as an intermediary? I cannot imagine that there are many benefits for you. I will not accept your proposal unless I am convinced."

It was an exceedingly natural suspicion. Morishita would just refuse to accept it if I said it was simply a good deed.

"I want to achieve a certain goal before I graduate from this school," I replied. "That goal is to keep the four classes in equilibrium until the very end of the third year, so that every class has a chance of graduating as Class A. The advice from Sakayanagi is just the best way for me to achieve that. For that purpose, the question of whether I personally graduate from Class A or not, and the question of who wins, are secondary."

That would likely be exceedingly hard to believe. Anyone attending and competing in this particular school would most definitely want to secure a seat in Class A. Supporting other classes was simply not a normal thing to do here.

"Honestly, that is very suspect. We will put the matter of cooperation on hold. Or at least, that is what I would like to say, but..." Morishita trailed off, appearing to give the matter some more thought, analyzing my words and actions before she continued. "Assuming that your objective and everything that you have told us is true, I must ask, are you truly okay with this, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka? That is to say, before getting to what this means for Class A, it means betraying your comrades."

"It's not like this would be a first. I've been selfishly doing whatever I please from the behind the scenes from the start," I replied.

"I see. Well, then, that means we very well cannot simply rejoice then, can we? Because it is possible that the oasis in the desert is full of poison," said Morishita. She was exactly right. She was talking to someone who helped other classes without any regard to the wishes of the class they belonged to. Which meant that although I was offering help to Morishita's class now, I might help other classes down the road, in yet unknown situations.

"If you decide that it's dangerous, you could just quit," I replied.

I knew the answer, of course. Morishita and her classmates had no way out. They had only two choices left: either move forward or give up.

"If we're to drink poison, we may as well drink our fill, as they say. Since we have already been driven to the point where we have no other choice, I have determined that our best bet would be to take action with an awareness of the danger. As for the rest, I will leave it to my classmates to make their own choice."

Morishita was nothing more than one individual who belonged to the class. She was not someone recognized as a leader, like Sakayanagi and the others.

"I will begin preparations immed—"

"Excuse me!"

Just as Morishita began planning her next moves, a voice unexpectedly came calling from afar. A female student, tall for a firstyear, appeared as she hurried over in a trot.

"A-Ayanokouji-senpai? My name is Negishi. I am a first-year student. W-would you please accept this?" she asked, her voice shaking but polite, and pulled out a letter to thrust it into my hands.

"What is this?" I asked.

When I asked that question in return, Negishi blushed, bowed her head, and then scampered off, as if she were running away.

"Receiving a love letter from a kouhai immediately after holding Sakayanagi Arisu in your arms? My, my, lucky you," teased Morishita.

"L-love letter?" repeated Yamamura.

"A nervous expression on her face, a plain envelope. And the girl blushed and ran away...," said Morishita. "Something smells fishy."

"I don't smell anything at all, though?" I replied.

"Yeah, I have my doubts about your sense of smell, Ayanokouji

Kiyotaka," said Morishita.

The girl had thrust the envelope into my hands so violently that I wondered what this letter could be, really.

"It is also possible that the letter could be from another girl and that she had been asked to give it to you. However, if she does make such a claim, it is possible that she could simply be lying out of embarrassment," said Morishita.

I turned the envelope over just in case, but there wasn't anything written on it.

"Let us have a look at the contents, then," Morishita said jeeringly. "Surely there must be naked, unvarnished truths contained within."

When I opened the envelope upon Morishita's mockery, I found a single sheet of white stationery inside. When I unfolded the carefully folded letter, I saw...

"A...phone number," muttered Yamamura, peeking at the letter with a flustered, embarrassed look on her face.

Aside from the 11-digit phone number, the only thing written on it was a single initial: the letter N.

"Well now, I suppose that's all well and good. It may well mean that she would like to deepen ties of friendship with you through conversation, rather than writing," said Morishita.

"...Maybe."

I looked at the initial and guessed who the sender of the letter was. Both Morishita and Yamamura seemed to think that it was from Negishi, who had handed it to me, but they were most likely wrong. I was sure that initial "N" certainly did apply, but I could think of only one person who would deliberately go through all the trouble of handing me a phone number in the form of a letter. Also, considering the fact that Negishi was the one to deliver it made a show of the fact that it was a Japanese-style of initials, in a roundabout way. I wondered if perhaps they wanted to say thanks for the "bit of trouble" the other day.

"Go ahead, call the number posthaste," Morishita said. "Whisper words of love to one another."

I honestly had no idea why Morishita, who had nothing to do with

this matter at all, was this enthusiastic about it...

"No, I'm not going to do that," I replied. "I don't need to at the moment."

"Oh my, what a suspenseful strategy. Hmm... How long do you plan to make her wait?" Morishita asked.

"Let's see. If I do call, I don't think it'll be sooner than a year from now," I replied.

"Wait, won't you have graduated?" asked Yamamura.

I put the letter away in my pocket as I pondered it silently, thinking that this phone number was *that* kind of thing.

Chapter 8: Parent and Child, Child and Parent

Spring vacation this year's. Most of them had been taken care of, but one of the remaining issues would surely be resolved in the near future. That said, there was little that I could do, and in this case, I could only rely on the passage of time. It was now four o'clock in the afternoon on the first of April, and I put on my school uniform and left the dormitory to head to school, since my parent—teacher meeting was starting at 4:30 p.m. Originally, the meeting was scheduled for five o'clock, but Chabashira-sensei had contacted me during the spring vacation, and it was decided that I would be switching places with Kouenji, who was initially just before me. The schedule had changed for one man's convenience.

Incidentally, students were instructed to wait in their respective classrooms fifteen minutes before their scheduled meetings. It was calculated that there would be plenty of time to meet, even if someone walked at a leisurely pace. Each student and their respective family members were allotted fifteen minutes for their actual parent–teacher meeting, and the intervals between meetings were thirty-minute increments.

I wondered if that man would really come. At this point, I felt like the chances were fifty-fifty, but I hadn't heard anything about him calling to cancel. So far, anyway.

"Coming to a place like this once is quite enough."

Although those words had been directed at Chairman Sakayanagi and not me, it should have been safe to conclude that it essentially meant that he would never be coming to this school again. Despite that, he had gone against that statement to attend this parent—teacher meeting. If that were true, then naturally that must have meant something was behind it. I had thought that Ishigami, who had a connection with him, might have contacted me in some form, but ultimately no action whatsoever had been taken until this day.

"I guess there's really no point thinking about it anyway," I mused

aloud.

Since the issue was completely separate from school life, I figured that was all it would be. In theory, it seemed that parent–teacher meetings were usually held in a classroom or something, but at this school, they were held in places like the waiting room, the guidance counseling office, the student council office, and whatnot. Perhaps it was out of respect for the privacy of each family. In the case of students from Horikita's class, we were supposed to use the guidance counseling office for the meetings, which was a little distance away from the classroom that we were to wait in. Once I took my seat in the empty classroom and waited for my scheduled time, I received a message from Chabashira-sensei ten minutes before that. She said that her previous meeting was over, and that I should come over to the guidance counseling office.

Now then, let's tackle this parent-teacher meeting, shall we? I thought to myself.

8.1

As soon as I saw the guidance office, Chabashira-sensei noticed me from where she was standing in front of the office door. The meeting was going to begin in just about five minutes, but that man was nowhere to be seen, even now.

"It seems like your father isn't here. Will he not be attending?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"No," I answered. "Or at least, I haven't received any word to that effect."

Apparently, that hadn't been the answer that she had expected. However, it was certainly true that he hadn't arrived yet, and Chabashira-sensei seemed a little anxious about whether or not he was really coming. I'm sure that, as a homeroom instructor, the matter of her overall schedule was something she was concerned about too. Time passed slowly as we stared at one another in the hallway, neither of us able to do anything but wait. Chabashira-sensei broached another topic, possibly because she was suffering in uncomfortable silence.

"Um, about Chie...," she started, "Have you seen her since then?"

"No, I haven't had any contact, either," I replied.

"I see," said Chabashira-sensei. "Well, I know this isn't something that I should expect from a student, but..."

"It will take a little time, but I will be doing something over spring vacation, just as I told you the other day."

"You did say that, but what in the world are you actually planning to do?" asked Chabashira-sensei. "Chie seems to be preparing herself for the worst, strengthening her resolve in order to defeat me. I can't imagine anyone will be able to convince her, by any means."

"I understand what you're trying to say, but in that case, would you be willing to go so far as stepping down as homeroom teacher?" I asked in return.

If Chabashira-sensei raised the white flag of surrender, then Hoshinomiya-sensei should be satisfied. I was sure that Chabashirasensei would be spending the next year focusing on her duties as a teacher.

"That's... I can't do that," said Chabashira-sensei. "I have a duty to watch over all of you in my class."

"In that case, it is important that you wait patiently. You can't act carelessly, Chabashira-sensei."

Right now, Chabashira-sensei needed the courage and fortitude to wait. I had no other choice here but to get her to understand that the best thing was to continue biding her time.

"I...understand," Chabashira-sensei said after thinking it over. "But if anything happens, contact me right away."

"I know. I trust you, and I'll be depending on you, Chabashira-sensei."

I figured that if a pupil said that to her, she wouldn't be able to argue. *Now then, was that man coming or not?* I thought. I heard footsteps, though faint, coming from the end of the hallway that I was looking down. As the clock ticked away, the man we were expecting appeared, dressed no differently from last year. He seemed to have noticed me right away, but he closed the distance without showing any kind of visible reaction.

"We have been waiting for you. I am the homeroom instructor, Chabashira."

"Ayanokouji. Thank you for meeting with me today," the man replied to Chabashira-sensei with a stern expression. Then he casually glanced over at me. "It's been a long time, Kiyotaka. I'm glad to see you're doing well. How's school life going?"

For a moment, the words coming out of his mouth made me think he must've hit his head or something, but it seemed like he was trying to act the part of a father in front of my homeroom teacher. If that were the case, that made things easier for me, so I figured I'd go ahead and play along to some extent. I was strongly conscious of the fact that this man was a "father" only while he was in front of certain people.

"Guess so," I replied, "I've made some pretty good friends too."

"Oh ho. I'm glad to hear that!"

There was no doubt that the two of us were engaging in a conversation that neither one of us cared about at all, but Chabashirasensei didn't comment.

"Well, then, please, step inside," said Chabashira-sensei.

She flashed a pleasant smile, opened the door, and led the two of us into the counseling office. That man and I sat down next to one another in chairs that were lined up, and Chabashira-sensei closed the door before sitting down in front of us.

"First of all, I would like to give you a brief report on Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun's life at school, his grades, and so on over the course of the past two years here," said Chabashira-sensei, getting the ball rolling.

With that, Chabashira-sensei slid two printouts of reports, which had been prepared in advance, onto each of our desks. My father picked up one of the copies and checked the contents, while I followed suit and looked over the other one.

"I would humbly ask that you please listen to what I have to say as you read," said Chabashira-sensei. "Please rest assured that he exhibits few behavioral problems with respect to his general attitude and his engagement during class. He is incredibly diligent."

Two years spent at this school. How did students perform in their written exams and special exams held by the school? How did the school evaluate the students? Good points and bad points were both

included in the report.

"Excuse me," he interrupted. "May I ask a question?"

"Yes, of course. What is it?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"What is OAA?" he asked in return.

He pointed to the written report, still playing the part of an ordinary father that was interested in his child's development.

"It is a system that has been newly introduced to our institution," Chabashira-sensei explained, "and you can think of it as a simple grading system for the students. The scores are revised every month and raised or lowered based on the student's overall ability at that time."

"An interesting experiment," he replied.

Even though the reports were written in great detail about how a student performed over a given year, you wouldn't be able to fully understand it at a glance. On the other hand, the OAA scores conveniently provided a rough idea of an individual's abilities. My OAA as of the end of March was as follows:

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka

Academic Ability A (87)

Physical Ability B (73)

Adaptability C (54)

Societal Contribution B (70)

Overall Ability B (71)

"Can you please tell me how this compares to the average student, in terms of standing?" came his follow-up question.

"He is in the top 5 percent of all second-year students. I believe his scores are enough to warrant considering him an honors student. Actually, I would say it may be even more than that. Looking at average scores in OAA for the second-year students, he has demonstrated an impressive rate of growth in the past six months," summarized Chabashira-sensei.

My score for overall ability around this time last year was fiftyone. Looking at it that way, my score certainly did improve a lot. "That's good. As a parent, I feel as though I can watch over him from here on with peace of mind," said the man.

With that, my father nodded firmly toward Chabashira-sensei, and what followed was a bland, inoffensive conversation between parent and teacher. Meanwhile, I remained silent and listened, occasionally responding when necessary with something simple to show that I was actively listening. After Chabashira-sensei had more or less finished going through her explanation of the presented material, she switched to the next topic.

"Now, then. May I ask what your thoughts are in regards to Kiyotaka-kun's future?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Meaning what?" he asked in return.

"I think that with his academic ability, he should aim for a higher-level university," Chabashira-sensei answered. "While I would say that academics are not everything in life, it is my personal opinion that, if he is able to get in, the best choice would be to give him an environment in which he can fully demonstrate what he is capable of."

"You are exactly correct. As a parent, I would be overjoyed if my child were to go on to a good college. However, the most important thing is what my son thinks. If he has no intention of going to higher education, then there is no point in discussing it here."

My father's answer had satisfied Chabashira-sensei, and now both of them turned their attention to me. Apparently, I was being asked to give a model answer.

"As long as my parent is giving me permission, I don't think going to college would be a bad choice," I declared.

"I see. Of course, personally, I have no reason to oppose. Do you have a university that you would like to go to?" he asked.

"I'm interested in the college that my senpai who have taken care of me at this school have gone off to," I replied.

"The senpai who have taken care of you?" asked Chabashirasensei. "Do you mean Horikita and Nagumo, by any chance?"

"Yes," I replied.

"I think that is a promising idea. While it certainly isn't a low bar to clear, it should definitely be possible for you," said Chabashirasensei, sounding as pleased as though I were her own offspring, and

went on to explain the university to my father.

"I see. One of the top three national universities, eh?" he answered, deliberately putting on a show and acting as though he were honestly impressed. "If that is what you wish, do not hesitate to go for it."

"I'm so glad to hear that. If your family says so, I think that is deeply heartening," she said to me.

"Yes, I suppose so," I replied.

"However, Kiyotaka," my father continued, "I am not against you going to college, but what do you see beyond that?"

What curious turn of events even led to this? Saying that, my father asked me for my opinion. Was he going to keep up this farce until the end of the parent–teacher meeting? It wasn't necessary to use up every single minute of the time you were allotted for a meeting, after all. We were already about halfway through, so even if we wrapped things up now, there wouldn't be any problem. It wasn't like he wanted to make a show of being a good father by continuing to talk about things at length that didn't interest him.

Which meant that he must've been prolonging this meeting for a reason.

"Beyond college?" I asked.

While I pretended to think about the answer to that question, I figured I'd take another guess as to what my father was after. What kind of fallout would be caused by prolonging this meeting, which could be over in five or ten minutes? What did he gain by using up the full time? What would happen in the event we were to go overtime? Naturally, there would be one effect. It could possibly cause problems for the next parent–teacher meeting, the discussion with Kouenji's father. Which meant, in other words, he was trying to create an excuse to get in contact with Kouenji's father under the guise of an accident. Was that it?

"Yes. Going to an excellent college is wonderful, of course," he said. "But what are your goals in going to college, and what are your prospects? I would like to hear that before we settle on your career path."

Chabashira-sensei, who couldn't possibly have any inkling as to

what my father was scheming, listened along happily to what seemed like a conversation between parent and child.

"I'm sorry, but I haven't decided any of that yet. Would it be too late for me to make those decisions in college?" I asked.

"No, if you haven't decided, then that's fine," he answered. "I wondered if you were going to college for no reason of your own, simply out of consideration for your parents. I simply thought that, if you were straying too far away from what you originally wanted for yourself, that would be a problem."

"Does that mean if I said that I wanted to find a job instead, you would consider it?" I asked in return.

"As a parent, yes, naturally," he replied.

"Thank you very much," I answered.

It was nice that he made this easy, since all I had to do was play along, but this certainly wasn't comfortable in any way, shape, or form. Even when he was acting, it wasn't pleasant to look at my father from up close. My homeroom teacher and my father continued to talk about even more meaningless drivel than I expected, and eventually, after neatly using up all the time we had been given, he even forced us to go a little bit overtime.

8.2

ONCE THE EXCRUCIATING parent–teacher meeting ended, the three of us got up from our seats. It had been an exceedingly long fifteen minutes and change.

"Thank you very much for everything today," my father said as he bowed to Chabashira-sensei, politely and properly.

"No, no, thank you!" Chabashira-sensei, flustered, hurriedly bowed in return. "We sincerely appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to come here."

I figured I was finally relieved of duty too; however, such wishful thinking was shattered in the blink of an eye. Immediately after we stepped out of the guidance counseling office, my father turned to say something to Chabashira-sensei before she could see us off.

"By the by, Sensei, this is nothing to do with my son, but may I have a bit more of your time?" he asked.

"Of course. Is there something on your mind?" she asked in return, without any visible signs of discomfort.

Normally, Chabashira-sensei probably would have wanted to contact Kouenji next, but she couldn't bluntly refuse him to his face. Fortunately, since they started talking about the school, and it had nothing to do with me, I just let my mind go blank and let their conversation go in one ear and out the other. As I looked out the window, the only thing on my mind was the wish to leave soon.

I didn't know the exact time because I couldn't exactly mess around with my cell phone, but I figured that they had talked for about five minutes by the time that even Chabashira-sensei herself had become unable to hide the impatience on her face any longer.

Finally, my father nodded deeply.

"You've soothed my doubts," he declared.

"Is that so? I am glad to hear that," said Chabashira-sensei, exhaling a sigh of relief now that the tension had evaporated.

"Thank you for giving me so much of your time today," he said.

"No, no, thank you," Chabashira-sensei replied. "We sincerely appreciate you coming all this way to our school. I am sure that Kiyotaka-kun is overjoyed as well."

I most certainly was not. Regardless, I responded with a firm nod, to show that I was being mature about this. After looking at my sensei once again, my father glanced in my direction at the very last moment.

"Just try not to do anything reckless for the rest of your time at school," my father said.

"Sure..." I replied.

Despite my father deliberately delaying things, it seemed like this parent–teacher meeting had gone smoothly. Without any further ado, my father quickly turned his back toward me and walked away.

"He's a good father, isn't he?" mused Chabashira-sensei. "He's not at all what I imagined."

Just as I expected, to my teacher, we looked like a normal father

and son.

"Maybe so," I replied.

At this moment, there was absolutely no point in explaining to Chabashira-sensei that she was wrong.

"Now, then, one mountain cleared, and one more to go. Once I get through that, I'll feel like a weight has beeen lifted from my shoulders."

"Kouenji, is it?" I asked. "I hope that his meeting will be as trouble-free as mine was."

"You're telling me. You were obedient to me, but I can't imagine how things will go with Kouenji," said Chabashira-sensei.

She probably wanted him to act like a gentle little lamb in front of his parents, but chances of that were likely slim. Chabashira-sensei casually looked down the hallway, and when I followed her gaze, I noticed my father standing immobile, staring back at me. Apparently, he was waiting for me to follow...

"Your father's waiting," Chabashira-sensei said. "If there's anything you'd like to discuss with him, you should now, while you have the chance."

"I'll do that," I replied.

There was no conceivable way he hadn't had his fill of talking already. Was he going to continue this game of delaying things, taking the game into overtime even with just the two of us? Or was he going to take some kind of action against me? In any case, it was impossible for me to avoid him or just not do anything. Chabashira-sensei, after bowing and walking away from me, quickly headed back inside the counseling office. Now, since I was left with no choice, I slowly walked over to my father...

No, over to the man who had come to the meeting earlier. I stopped once he and I were standing side by side, but the man didn't seem like he was going to open his mouth to speak.

"Was it really necessary for you to wait?" I asked.

I could have ignored him completely, but I decided to talk to him, to try to find out what he was up to. However, I figured that even if I was right on the mark, he probably wasn't going to confirm the reason so easily.

"I just thought that we could have a little chat, as father and son, more or less," he said.

"Father and son, huh? Unfortunately, I have never once thought of us that way," I replied.

"That's for sure," he answered.

One thing was for certain: I didn't bear any particular grudge against this man. It was just that our relationship was more like a teacher-and-student relationship rather than a parent-and-child one. Wait, no, perhaps even that wasn't the right way to put it. A more removed, hierarchical relationship, in which the distance between us could never be bridged.

"I've spent the past year racking my brain over what to do with you post-graduation," said the man in question.

"You don't have to bother explaining it to me. Even if you did, I already know," I replied. "And I have no intention of rebelling against it, anyway."

"I will install you as a new mentor in the White Room, and create a generation that surpasses you," said that man.

He went and said it aloud, even though I already told him that I knew.

"If we're looking at it in the long term, that is probably a safe choice. If you become a mentor and operate the White Room, there's a chance that in twenty years, I'll have countless of the best of the best, the kind of capable people that I'm looking for."

The man's mouth moved in an indifferent manner as he envisioned that future.

"But that safe choice is a preposterous future, and to be honest, it's a dreary one at that. Just as the state of things in the world is changing minute by minute, the environment surrounding me has also changed considerably in just one year," said that man.

"I'm not interested in your environment," I replied.

"And I couldn't care less about what you're interested in," he fired back. "What's important is how I put that talent to use."

"What is it you're telling me to do?" I asked.

"You have at least a vague idea of what I'm talking about, don't

you?" he asked in reply.

It was like his stare coiled around me. I didn't know whether it was this man's intuition or something else, but I guess it wasn't surprising that he was still suspicious of what I kept hidden in my mind.

"Dunno," I replied.

"At any rate, it will take time to prepare," he continued. "You can do whatever you like for another year. Until then, I will not do anything whatsoever to interfere."

It seemed that he was giving a guarantee that I could live out the rest of my time at this school as a student, but I couldn't trust him even that much. I wouldn't be surprised even if he changed his mind tomorrow and shamelessly, unscrupulously sent new assassins in after me.

"Are you not worried that my intentions will change in the meantime and that I'll rebel?" I asked.

"Rebel? That's not going to happen," he answered. "You ought to understand everything by now. Namely, that my cooperation is indispensable if you are to fully demonstrate your own worth and your reason for being. In the unlikely event that you were to do something like defy me, or resist despite knowing that, then, well. There would only be one conclusion."

It wouldn't be something like my freedom or lack thereof. It would be in the tier of life or death. It seemed clear that this man had no concern whatsoever as to whether I was his actual child or not.

"No matter how confident you are in your physical strength, if you're unexpectedly hit by a stray bullet, that'll be the end," he added.

For 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. There was no way someone could completely protect themselves at all times. In fact, I'd been killed many times over in simulations in the White Room. Being attacked while sleeping. Shooting from a blind spot. Or something in the food. Although we sharpened our minds to the utmost limits and received training to increase our chances of survival, at the same time, we were taught that our lives were in no way guaranteed. That point was drilled into us, almost to the point of nausea.

"Do not think about anything unnecessary, Kiyotaka," he warned me.

By "anything unnecessary," he meant our earlier conversation topics, including all that foolish blabbering about going to college.

"If you want that, you'll need to keep convincing me that you're useful to me," I replied.

"Oh?" he said curiously. "In that case, is there something that you wish for?"

He spoke as though he couldn't even imagine that there was such a thing, and he was right in the sense that there wasn't any physical object I wanted.

"What happened to Yagami, who you sent here to have me expel—well, no, who you sent here to check on me?" I asked.

"What you want is that information?" he asked in return.

To be perfectly honest, I couldn't care less, but the same wasn't true for Amasawa.

"He's been disposed of, of course. Or rather, I'm sure that the old me, from a time before last year, would have answered as such," he answered, then paused for a moment, with a look on his face that I couldn't read any emotions from. "That one is still one of the better candidates we've had in the White Room. Now, we are having him undergo the education process once more."

"Re-education, huh?"

"Unlike you, we gave him too much emotion," he elaborated. "You could say that this is also a test, to get rid of that."

"Meaning that Amasawa will eventually follow Yagami?" I asked.

"That's what it means, yes," he said. "But I will allow her to stay here for two more years. Whether she graduates or is expelled, she'll be collected afterward, and we'll verify the differences between her and Yagami."

"It'd be fine if she could just hear that from you, though," I replied.

"We are teaching them so that they will listen," he said. "Just as it is not so simple for you to rebel against me, despite your skills. In the unlikely event that they do not comply, that is when we will go as far as to dispose of them."

For most people, something like being able to influence another

person's existence or lifespan so easily wasn't something that you just got used to, but that didn't apply to this man. At least as far as the children who were chosen to be put into the White Room from before they were even conceived, they should understand all of the details, including the background. Even in the unlikely event that Amasawa were to develop a rebellious spirit in her time at this school, they could simply use Yagami as a pretext in dealing with her.

Amasawa couldn't abandon Yagami. It was precisely because she had been instilled with such emotions that things would backfire. Well, actually, no, I supposed that the end result might have been the same regardless of how much emotion she might have. Looking at the matter impartially, you would think that Amasawa could object to things like instructions from this man without batting an eye, unless her opponent was an especially skilled pursuer. There was even the possibility of her publicizing the White Room to the world at large, forcing the plan to collapse, or driving them into a corner.

However, I couldn't imagine that Amasawa would do such a thing. Even for me, at this time, I didn't consider that as an option. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it was unthinkable. Our education, which we had received since early childhood, was so deeply ingrained in us that it couldn't simply be washed away just like that.

"I never imagined you would care about Yagami and Amasawa," he said.

"Even though we were never really acquainted, Yagami is still like a little brother," I replied.

"Laughable. It would seem that spending these past two years with normal students has had a profound effect on you."

There was no aspect of play whatsoever in the education in the White Room.

"Is that a welcome change for you? Or the opposite?" I asked.

"If I had to say, I believe it's a welcome change. When you were in the White Room, you were a complete machine, for better or worse. The fact that humanity has been instilled within you, even if it's only ostensibly, will be an asset in the future," he mused.

Which meant that if he could ultimately control me, then it wasn't worth worrying about, from the sounds of it.

"Well, I've confirmed everything that I wanted to on my end. Can I leave now?" I asked.

"Don't be in such a rush," he chided. "You don't get many opportunities to speak with me."

"I'm fine with that, though," I replied, starting to feel uncomfortable with how long this man had been standing there.

Yet he kept speaking regardless. "About what your homeroom instructor said earlier, about how your class has grown thanks to your effort. Even though it is within the small world of a classroom, the fact that you got them promoted to Class A is not bad. Well done."

"I'm surprised you would praise me over such a stupid, insignificant thing," I replied.

"I'm sure it was no trouble for you to win, considering your ability. But that isn't why I was praising you. I was praising you for your attitude in getting to the top. You wouldn't have been concerned about such things before coming to this school."

"Maybe so," I replied. "But in that case, then your aspirations are fruitless. I'm not trying to get to the top, not really. If you need proof, I'm going to be moving into a lower-ranked class soon."

"Oh? You're saying that you're deliberately going to fall all the way down again?" he asked. "You mean you're going to pull them up, and pull others down from below, then?"

"Who can say? Maybe, maybe not," I replied.

I had a feeling about the way the wind was going to blow from here on out, as it was. I was deliberately not looking at the results, because I thought that might get my hopes up.

"That's an interesting response," he said.

I didn't want to engage in pointless conversation about that here, but there still wasn't any sign that he was going to let me go.

"What you're after is—"

Fed up and thinking that enough was enough already, I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could speak, I heard the sound of footsteps from the stairway. I supposed it was around the time when it wouldn't have been unusual for Kouenji and his attending parent to come by. The moment the person making that sound came into view, my father's expression immediately changed.

It was none other than Kouenji's father. He was tall, with a good build. Kouenji's father spotted us standing there at the end of his line of sight and briefly came to a stop once he finished climbing the stairs. At that moment, my own father acted without delay and called out to him.

"Oh, heavens, it couldn't possibly be," he said. "President Kouenji, is that you?"

My father made a deliberate show of surprise, bowing his head before he stepped in front of the other man and forcibly blocked his path. A chance encounter with a parent and their child, at a place and time when they were visiting for a parent–teacher meeting. His performance, of making it look like a coincidence, was certainly well executed. Kouenji's father did not utter a word at first but gazed fixedly at that man, like he was looking down on him. His intimidating aura was quite impressive.

"I do not wish to be rude, but who are you, exactly?" asked Kouenji's father.

Upon being asked that question, my father immediately took out his business card and offered it to Kouenji's father.

"Please forgive me for the late introduction," he replied. "I am a member of the Mutual Prosperity Party. My name is Ayanokouji Atsuomi, and I have been hoping to meet with you for quite some time, President Kouenji. I never imagined that I would be able to do just that here, while visiting my son. Well, I suppose one never knows what coincidence may bring."

"I make it a rule not to accept unnecessary business cards," said Kouenji's father.

"I see. Well, then, in that case, I will make every possible effort so that you would graciously accept my card. If at all possible, would you please do me the honor of giving me a few moments of your time, perhaps after the meeting with your son has concluded? You will not regret it."

My father bowed his head once again. I didn't know why he was interested in Kouenji's father, nor did I care myself, but I would've preferred that he took care of this kind of bothersome nonsense without involving me.

"Sorry, but I have an appointment after this parent–teacher meeting. I will have to pass," said Kouenji's father.

That man had drawn close to him, pretending that it had been by chance, but apparently, Kouenji's father had seen right through him. I figured that man wouldn't back down so easily, but I wondered how he would respond.

"I see... I am extremely interested in this appointment you speak of, President Kouenji," that man persisted, looking up as he said those words and making a show of force with direct eye contact, revealing that this encounter wasn't by chance after all. With his grasp on the inner workings of social politics, he must have known that doing so would make a bad impression, but thought that forcefully bringing Kouenji's father into a dialogue was worth it.

"It is time for my meeting. Please excuse me," said Kouenji's father.

Once Kouenji's father said that, the other man slowly made way for him. As he passed by, Kouenji's father and I locked gazes for just a brief moment. The sharp gleam in his eyes and the powerful sense of purpose conveyed in his gaze were even stronger than that of Ayanokouji Atsuomi. It wasn't simply his social standing or his title; it seemed like you could say it was a manifestation of himself, which radiated from a perfect body. In terms of age, he must have been in his forties or fifties, and past his physical peak, but I could sense in an instant that he was an unfathomably strong man. My classmate Kouenji's talents were undeniably something he inherited from this person.

"For a child—"

Kouenji's father was about to say something to me, but ultimately he cut himself off and went straight toward the guidance counseling office at the end of the hallway.

"He's not an easy one to catch. Oh well, if he were, then I wouldn't bother," that man said, watching Kouenji's father walk away.

"I knew from the beginning that you had no interest in my parent–teacher meeting. It looks like your objective was meeting with Kouenji's father," I noted.

He must have suddenly decided to come to school when he noticed that Kouenji's name was listed near mine in the schedule. The

fact that our conferences were scheduled together was probably not something dictated by that man, and, hypothetically, if the date and time of my conference and Kouenji's had been far apart, he may not have come at all.

"It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he is the biggest supporter of the National Civic Party. He doesn't make appearances, he doesn't say anything, but he donates, and he's a particularly important person to the NCP," he explained.

In other words, to this man, Kouenji's father was a supporter of the enemy.

"If I can get him to change sides, the situation will change significantly," he said in conclusion.

"If that's the case, then couldn't you have just met with him anywhere, even if you can't here?" I asked.

"Not at all," he answered. "His private life is shrouded in mystery, and he spends most of his time abroad. Even if I made the effort to catch him, it wouldn't be so easy."

Which meant that if he knew such an untraceable man were to appear here, he'd leap on the opportunity.

"At any rate, he dealt with you so casually, huh?" I commented.

Just then, his phone rang, and he answered without looking at all bothered.

"...Yes. We'll just go along with it, then," he said.

After that brief back-and-forth he had with someone, he hung up the phone and turned to make his way down the stairs, without saying a word to me. Now that we had actually made contact, I saw proof that the time spent with me had become nothing more than a waste. Since I had no intention of walking down the stairs alongside him, I decided to just watch him go.

person appeared, as if to replace him: the son, Kouenji Rokusuke. He strode down the hallway, humming a tune. I thought he was just going to continue on and pass by me, but right when he stopped humming, his long legs came to a stop too.

"Ayanokouji boy. May I have a moment of your time?" asked Kouenji.

"Sure. It's unusual for you to come talk to me, though," I replied.

"Would I be inconveniencing you?" he asked.

"No, I was just surprised, since I didn't think you were the type to make conversation."

"I was just thinking I would issue you a bit of a warning," he said with a grin, and smoothed back his hair. "Your behavior as of late, well, you've been doing more and more things that are just intolerable."

"Intolerable?" I asked. "I don't understand what you mean by that."

"Surely there's no need for you to be so evasive, is there?" he replied. "I mean, for instance, the matter of the End-of-Year Special Exam."

From the way Kouenji was speaking, it sounded like he was talking about more than just that.

"You mean the thing with Maezono?" I asked in return. "That was an unavoidable choice, if we wanted our class to win. I'm fairly sure I explained the situation properly after the exam, didn't I?"

"Do you recall how I once said that I could see neither truth nor lies in you?" Kouenji replied, an audacious smile on his face.

"Hmm, you might have said that, come to think of it."

"Words that come from you are often laced with a foreign contamination. 'You were only forced to deal with a traitor in order for the class to win.' All of that is nothing more than an excuse for you to selfishly do whatever you please, isn't it?"

"It would appear that you have been terribly misled about me."

A unique view of me that differed even from that of Kushida's and Karuizawa's.

"You can fool the masses, but it will not work on me," said Kouenji. Maybe he wanted to demonstrate something, because he took out a hand mirror and held it out in front of me. "Take a look. See the expression on your face. The truth is clearly reflected in this mirror, wouldn't you say?"

All that I could see reflected in the mirror was the same old me.

"Sorry, but I don't get it. A mirror is a mirror. It only reflects what's in front of it," I replied.

"Apparently, the ways you and I see things are different. Well, no, perhaps you see it too, but you're simply lying."

"You don't care about the class in the first place, Kouenji. You aren't supposed to care about what happens to anyone. So, what's the point of you giving me this warning?"

"Trying to bat away a fly or a mosquito that's buzzing about in front of you all the time doesn't mean that you have a particular interest in the pest, does it?" he asked rhetorically. "That is all there is to it."

"In that case, it's not necessary for you to show restraint. If something is bothering you, the quickest method would be to simply knock it down," I replied, suggesting that he shouldn't bother trying to issue a warning or anything like that, but rather, to just deal with me himself. "But you're not going to do that. Because even if it's a little irritating for you to have something flitting about, it's not like there's any direct harm being done to you, after all."



In the past, Kouenji has basically never made a move on his own. Unless it was something like what happened with Yamauchi or Hirata, when they went out of control and physically attacked him, he wouldn't do anything to deal with an opponent.

"I shall take your advice, but I will act according to my own thinking," Kouenji said.

I had tried something new in nudging him, forcefully plunging into the unknown, but as expected, I couldn't see any meaningful change in Kouenji's behavior.

"You can do as you please in the future, as well," he continued.
"You are free even to dissect anyone's mind and explore to your heart's desire. It is law that the weak, if they do not possess the ability, will be trampled by the strong. There is no place for morals in this world, and those who cannot stop the strong are not qualified to complain."

That made sense. That was the kind of ethos that a person like Kouenji Rokusuke would have. Which was precisely why I had some suspicions about him stopping me here, when his parent—teacher meeting was about to begin. This wasn't the time for him to be so easygoing, and yet he deliberately went out of his way to issue me a warning. Although calling me a fly that makes him uncomfortable should've probably prompted some kind of reaction from a fellow student.

"If you're having trouble coming out and saying what you really feel, it's okay, you can just come out and say it," I replied. "Don't hold back. This is how I spend my time."

I decided to press Kouenji, if only to see what his reaction would be. The matter of handling this man in class that had been a source of problems the entire time meant I was once again confirming whether he was someone who ought to be eliminated, for Horikita's sake if not my own.

"It would seem you really do intend to stoop to being the villain, apparently," said Kouenji.

"You know what I'm thinking?" I asked.

"I know exactly what you're thinking," he answered. "My sixth sense is somewhat sharp, you see."

Sixth sense, huh? Whether or not that was the real reason was

irrelevant at this point. It wouldn't cause any real problems if I pushed this conversation along even further. Even if some inconveniences arose, it'd be too late, anyway.

"When I first came to this school, I thought that just being a normal student would've been good enough. I thought that it would be fine if I could spend my entire three years as an ordinary student. However, in going through the cycle of routine life at this school, I have found something I want to do. Now, I'm going to do it. Instead of having a competition where one or two strong candidates compete over being in Class A, I'm going to have three or four classes compete with each other, to keep the never-ending competition going. That's all there is to it," I explained.

"Which is why you will transfer classes, forcefully putting things into balance," said Kouenji.

It sounded like Kouenji did know that I was considering leaving the class after all.

"I won't deny that. Though whether or not that can actually materialize depends on what happens next," I replied. "But the matter of transferring aside, I intend to do whatever it takes to keep each class in the running, on equal footing."

"Well, you are free to do whatever you wish in that regard, but I hope you will be content, playing with the little girl and dragon boy."

"Sorry, but I can't guarantee to keep it within that range. As was the case with Sakura and Maezono, I will not hesitate to have someone expelled if I deem it a necessary measure in the future, even if that person is Wang Mei-Yu."

For the thoroughly self-centered Kouenji, the person known as Mii-chan might be the one exception. Kouenji, whose expression had remained unchanging throughout this entire conversation thus far, raised his eyebrows slightly at that.

"Heh heh heh."

"Only one person?" said Kouenji, laughing with amusement. "I believe I have expressed many times that I am not interested, but...do you really want me that badly?"

It would appear that my provocation had been conveyed quite well.

"Who can say?" I replied. "I didn't really say anything about telling you to make a move."

Our gazes met.

You're not fixated on things like Class A. I understand that very well. I couldn't do much of anything from the inside, but once I'm on the outside, the situation will change dramatically. If I leave Horikita's class, the situation will change significantly, Kouenji.

"You ought to quit while you're ahead," Kouenji said. "I recognize you possess uncommon talents, in your own way, but they are not at the level where you could come against me. Even if we're just talking about numbers and letters dancing about on top of paper, I would put you to shame if I were to get serious."

In other words, he was saying that he could do better than me when it came to academics.

"If we're just making cheap shots at each other, even Ike and Hondou could say the same things. Can you prove it?" I asked.

"I do not have an inclination to show off," said Kouenji. "I intentionally keep things to a bare minimum in my ordinary studies. If you perfect your thinking based only on the knowledge that the world has created, your thinking will end up becoming rigid. Therefore, lacking in individuality, and boring. That is obvious when looking at you."

It was certainly true that I had absorbed a lot of the accumulated knowledge in this world. I used that knowledge as a starting point from which I would conceive and construct all things.

"It is the not knowing that allows me to arrive at my own answers," said Kouenji.

He certainly had a very peculiar way of thinking, but what he was saying was true in its own way. Kouenji definitely had a high capacity for learning, but he deliberately made a point of not absorbing it all. After putting his mirror back in his pocket, Kouenji walked away. It would be interesting to see if he were to start helping rather than hindering Horikita, but I wondered if that day would ever really arrive. For now, I still didn't know.

The Chairman's office. Standing there with good posture and a nervous expression was Chairman Sakayanagi, a usual fixture of this room. After greeting Kijima, his first guest, there was a heavy silence hanging over them. Time passed in that atmosphere, in which it felt like he couldn't even let out a single sigh, until finally there came a knock at the door before it opened. That was the signal that the second visitor that Sakayanagi had been impatiently waiting for had arrived. In that moment, a man of large stature, Kouenji, appeared. Kijima immediately stood up and offered his hand to Kouenji, who walked with a powerful stride.

"It has been quite some time, Kouenji-san," said Kijima. "I have been eagerly looking forward to the day we could meet again."

"Good," replied Kouenji, "I feel the same, Prime Minister. It's been three years, hasn't it?"

"I believe it has," said Kijima.

Both men exchanged a firm handshake and took their seats with smiles on their faces.

"The results appear to be favorable, Prime Minister," said Kouenji.

"That too is all thanks to your tireless efforts, Kouenji-san," replied Kijima. "Because I do not have to worry about what's behind me, I can do as I please."

"The higher your position, the more you'll be attacked, after all. Regardless of whether it's by friend or foe," said Kouenji.

"Yes," Kijima said, "I understand that's the way it is in the world of politics, but hardship is unavoidable."

"I am truly pleased that we have a leader who can cross swords with the rest of the world," said Kouenji.

They were each paying respect to each other. Even Sakayanagi, who intended to just stick close and be a listener, could sense this immediately.

"Please wait! You can't go in there!"

Just when Sakayanagi thought he heard the flustered voice of one of the security guards coming through the door he was posted at, that door was opened with great force.

"Please pardon the intrusion," declared Ayanokouji as he barged in.

Kouenji and Kijima had taken their seats just moments ago, and now Ayanokouji Atsuomi had forcefully entered the room. In comparison to the surprised Sakayanagi, Kouenji and Kijima didn't appear to be the least bit shaken by this.

"A-Ayanokouji-se...san," Sakayanagi stammered, "I am in the middle of a meeting with guests right now, and—"

Just as Sakayanagi took a step forward, reluctantly steeling himself to drive the visitor away, Kijima gently raised his hand to make him stop. He then flashed his white, straightened teeth, and held out his hands in a gesture of welcome.

"I do not mind. Sometimes, you just have to enjoy these sorts of unexpected happenings," said Kijima, even as he glanced over to Kouenji for approval.

"Well, well... Prime Minister Kijima. I never imagined you would be in a place like this, even in my wildest dreams," said Ayanokouji.

"It's not especially surprising, is it?" asked Kijima, maintaining a calm expression as he examined Ayanokouji's deliberate look of astonishment. "I have experience serving as the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, as well. And I have also made a small contribution to this institution, the Advanced Nurturing High School. Besides, it is a well-known fact that I am on familiar terms with President Kouenji. As a legislator, I am sure that you know that much, Ayanokouji-san."

Kijima said the quiet part aloud, perhaps just to see how Ayanokouji would respond.

"I am deeply honored that you remember me," said Ayanokouji.

Ayanokouji had once been known as the right-hand man of the now-deceased Naoe, a leading figure of the NCP. After being ousted from the political world, he had changed parties, and once again returned to the political stage. Ayanokouji was proud of the fact that his notoriety hadn't faded.

"Is he a famous man?" asked Kouenji.

When Kouenji posed that question to Kijima, he briefly closed his

eyes and smiled softly.

"Whether someone is famous or not doesn't matter," Kijima answered with a soft smile. "It's simply a matter of course for the prime minister, who is entrusted with the country, to commit to memory the names and faces of all the members of the Diet, after all."

Kijima emphatically stated that he was unaware of anything Ayanokouji might have achieved; he simply remembered him as an individual. Kijima was well aware that any self-aggrandizing legislator would feel inwardly frustrated from something like that alone.

"You are quite the gifted comedian, Prime Minister Kijima," said Ayanokouji. "You are saying that you remember the names and faces of all members of the Diet?"

"Of course," replied Kijima, as though it was only natural.

However, there were over seven hundred people serving as members of the Diet. Was Kijima telling the truth? Even though Ayanokouji had immediately decided that he was lying, there was no way for him to confirm that.

"Well, then, I think it's perhaps time we hear what business you have, Ayanokouji-san," Kijima said.

"Pardon my rudeness, but I came here because I would like to speak with President Kouenji. I was told that he would be here," said Ayanokouji.

"Who told you that?" asked Kouenji, his chin resting on his fist and his arm propped up on the armrest of his chair. His posture and voice made the question feel intimidating.

"I cannot say for certain. I'm afraid I don't recall exactly," answered Ayanokouji. "But I imagine it must've been from an employee of this school. They must have just so happened to have seen you, by chance."

Of course, that was a lie. He had simply caught wind of the fact that Kijima and Kouenji were meeting at this place and time, after the End-of-Year Special Exam. This back-and-forth was nothing more than a simple, convenient means to assess them. This was an enclosed space, and what's more, he usually didn't have the opportunity to speak with Kijima in a small group. For someone like Ayanokouji, who didn't care about offending others or being hated, this was a good opportunity to

appraise him.

Compared to when he was younger, Kijima's physical presence seemed weaker, and he did not seem so threatening. So much so, in fact, that Ayanokouji had an almost worrying, precarious feeling. A feeling like he could easily grind him into dust. Many would think that it was Kouenji, seated next to him, who had an overwhelming sense of presence. However, at the same time, Ayanokouji also sensed that such naive thinking could prove fatal. This Kijima person, who had a nonchalant look of innocence on his face, was a man who had achieved everything.

"However, Mr. Ayanokouji," said Kouenji, "I believe I turned down your proposal, did I not?"

"I suppose you could say that I don't know when to give up. I was humbly hoping that you might make some time for me," Ayanokouji replied.

"So you pushed your way past the men in black suits and forced your way inside?" asked Kouenji.

"That's just my nature," said Ayanokouji.

Now Kouenji, too, was once again evaluating the impudent man before him, while Ayanokouji did the same. To what extent was he worth befriending? Or was it necessary to eliminate him, as an enemy? This time was precious, granted to decide those things.

"Please, I'm telling you this for your own sake, Ayanokouji-san. I think perhaps it would be better to leave this for another time," pleaded Sakayanagi, feeling that he couldn't just sit by and watch in silence any longer, if only for Ayanokouji's sake.

However, Ayanokouji wasn't in a position to back down. With limited options, he was going to push forward. He had no likability to lose in the first place, anyway. In that case, he figured it would've been a loss if he didn't plunge forward.

"Were the two of you in the middle of an important business discussion, by any chance?" he asked.

"No, no," Kijima answered. "I simply came to visit an old friend, that's all."

"Oh, I see," said Ayanokouji simply, looking at Kijima as he politely denied it. "Well, then, in that case, I would love to be included

in this conversation."

"You are quite the audacious man. You must have a considerable number of enemies," said Kouenji.

Kouenji didn't care for pushy or aggressive people, but he was beginning to appreciate Ayanokouji's pluck, and the fact that he wasn't timid.

"Yes. It's in my nature to say what I want to say, regardless of whether it's to friend or foe," said Ayanokouji.

"It must be difficult for you, Prime Minister, if there are many legislators like him," said Kouenji.

"He once served under Naoe-san, whom I respected more than anyone. I'm not surprised that he has the guts to do something like this," said Kijima.

With a grin, Kijima showed a positive attitude toward Ayanokouji's approach. At the same time, Ayanokouji braced himself once again. After all, this man knew who he was. He was conscious of the fact that he wasn't just another member of the Diet.

"If it is all right with you, President Kouenji, let's all chat for a bit. I find myself rather interested in Ayanokouji-san. This is an opportunity we don't often come by, so why don't we all have a seat?" said Kijima, and urged Ayanokouji to sit down.

"I am fine standing, thank you," Ayanokouji refused politely. "Considering my position, this is appropriate for me."

Kijima once again looked to Kouenji for confirmation, and although he didn't seem terribly enthused, Kouenji consented to allowing Ayanokouji to stay.

"It would seem that your son is here at this school. If I remember correctly, his name is...Kiyotaka-kun, yes?" said Kijima.

"I didn't realize that you knew my son's name," said Ayanokouji.

"It is not only the names of the Diet members that I remember," said Kijima.

Ayanokouji listened to Kijima's words without even twitching an eyebrow, but Sakayanagi appeared slightly shaken. Despite the fact that Kijima had seen the entire exam, Sakayanagi hadn't thought that Kijima had been watching quite so closely.

"Actually, I came to visit a few days ago as well. At that time, I thought I'd see President Kouenji's son, and while I was here, I watched the special exam that the second-years underwent. But...I remember feeling like there was a student who really caught my eye," said Kijima.

Internally, Ayanokouji wanted to reply that he already knew all of that, but he kept silent. That was because the only people who knew that Kijima had been watching the special exam were Kijima himself and the school officials. Not even Chairman Sakayanagi had any way of knowing that Ayanokouji was aware of the exam's details. However, Ayanokouji saw this as an opportunity.

"How did my son look in your eyes, Prime Minister Kijima?" he asked.

It was only just one instance, and what's more, it was an exam that was essentially a children's game. Even so, now that Kijima had recognized the existence of Kiyotaka, Ayanokouji was genuinely interested in what impressions he had and what kind of evaluation he would give.

"He seemed like he could become an even better politician than you are right now," said Kijima.

Kijima, without hesitation, expressed his assessment of Kiyotaka. At first blush, it sounded like it was praise for Ayanokouji's son, when in fact it was the opposite. He was implying that Ayanokouji was a lesser politician than his child.

"I never imagined the prime minister would evaluate him so. As a parent, I could not be more pleased," said Ayanokouji, deliberately reacting with gratitude, as though he was taking what Kijima said at face value.

"I imagine that must be the fruits of your labor," Kijima continued. "You've adopted a special curriculum, haven't you?"

"Oh no, nothing special," Ayanokouji replied. "It's because of the great education he's getting at this school."

Kijima had suddenly hinted at the White Room, but Ayanokouji managed not to choke, because he had expected exactly that to happen from the moment the subject of his son had come up.

"You said that you wished to speak with me, but unfortunately, I am a supporter of the National Civic Party. You mentioned that you

were with the Mutual Prosperity Party," said Kouenji.

"Yes," answered Ayanokouji. "However, I had previously belonged to the NCP, just like Prime Minister Kijima."

Since Kijima had become prime minister, the NCP had dealt with some difficulties, but its approval ratings had stayed consistently high regardless, heavily suggesting that it would remain in power in the long term. On the other hand, the MPP, to which Ayanokouji belonged, was in an extremely disadvantaged state, operating as a party that was only able to heckle.

"I could gather as much, from the gist of the conversation. Why did you leave the party?" asked Kouenji.

"It would seem that some people would find it inconvenient if I had remained in the NCP," answered Ayanokouji bluntly, even though the head of the NCP was sitting right in front of him.

"Ayanokouji-san, you seem to just come out and say whatever is on your mind," commented Kijima. "Naoe-sensei had praised you for that when he was still around, but at the same time, he also had his misgivings. Now that you have returned to the world of politics, don't you think you ought to avoid making statements that could lead to misunderstandings, regardless of which party you're affiliated with?"

"I am greatly obliged for your frank advice, Prime Minister," said Ayanokouji in response, "However, I have been accepted and recognized by my supporters for that exact outspoken manner. It is my intention to say and do exactly what's on my mind, so that I do not turn into the kind of politician who talks his way out of things through sophistry or convenience."

"I see. Now then, there is one thing I would like to ask you. If it were possible, would you like to return to the NCP?" asked Kijima.

"No, I am not currently considering that," said Ayanokouji.

Even if Ayanokouji did express that desire, Kijima wouldn't say yes to it, and there was absolutely no chance that it would go through. It was obvious that, at best, it would only move forward a bit as a procedure, and it would be dropped by a review board meeting of committee members. Although individual legislators of small constituencies were free to switch parties, it wouldn't be so simple in Ayanokouji's case to change over to the NCP. If he could have done so, he wouldn't have run as a candidate under the MPP in the first place.

"So, you are saying that you're going to change Japanese politics from the MPP, then," said Kijima.

"I intend to," replied Ayanokouji. "I am sure that must seem impossible for someone like you, Prime Minister Kijima, who belongs to a big political party. However, do you know of the pendulum principle? Right now, the political world is leaning heavily in your direction. Whether it is to the right or left is irrelevant, but one thing is certain: I am positioned at the opposite end from you."

The next time the political world moved significantly, the pendulum would swing all the way. Ayanokouji spoke with certainty about this.

"Remarkably, you seem to be speaking to the incumbent prime minister as though you were equals, Mr. Ayanokouji," said Kouenji.

"That is because I am in a situation where there is nothing for me to fear," Ayanokouji said. "I haven't the slightest intention of clinging to my seat in the Diet, simply awaiting my chance and staring at the faces of those around me."

"Ayanokouji-san. You are duly aware that you are currently a member of the MPP, yes?" asked Kijima.

The difference between the NCP and the MPP as political parties was massive. Kijima warned Ayanokouji that there was no room for him in Kouenji's pocket.

"I'm afraid I do not understand. Could you perhaps be more specific?" asked Ayanokouji.

"Enough is enough," Kouenji cut in. "Prime Minister Kijima appears to be fussing over you, but I do not judge people based on right or wrong. I do not judge based solely on political parties. I judge people only on whether or not they are competent, and at this current point in time, I would not say that you win in any area over Prime Minister Kijima, Mr. Ayanokouji. You are not even worth listening to, let alone worth helping."

"I greatly appreciate your harsh critique," said Ayanokouji.

"Ayanokouji-san. Kouenji-san is a self-made man, but do you know why he will not engage with you? It is not because he is on good terms with me. You had once lost your position, but you were elected again after being chosen by the people. Which means that you have

gained the trust of a certain segment of the population, yes? The way a country should be and the direction it goes can be different, naturally. Whether the party is the same or not, things like that don't matter. However, the public are not stupid, by any means. It would be better not to think that the people would meaninglessly endorse a candidate with such transparent ambitions," said Kijima, simplifying Kouenji's words with his own explanation.

"I gave you some time because I thought it could make for an interesting conversation, but there's no point in letting this go any further. Take a step back, Mr. Ayanokouji," said Kouenji. "You are a boring man."

"It is unfortunate that I couldn't measure up to your expectations," said Ayanokouji.

Even if Ayanokouji hadn't achieved any tangible results, he was at least able to instill a sense of his presence in them.

"Well, then, I suppose I had better excuse myself here," he added as he began to withdraw, far less forcefully than he had entered.

"Your son did some excellent work in leading his class to victory in the special exam the other day," said Kijima. "He will most certainly become someone exceptional. Let's chat about that at another time."

"Thank you very much, Prime Minister," said Ayanokouji with a bow. "I look forward to the opportunity."

Kouenji watched with new interest as Ayanokouji turned toward the door, having been looking at him with nothing but boredom during the entire episode.

"I can't believe you would say that, Prime Minister Kijima," said Kouenji. "As a parent myself, I can't let that go ignored."

"Your son is certainly quite exceptional too, President Kouenji," said Kijima.

Ayanokouji, upon hearing this, stopped in his tracks and turned on his heel.

"Earlier, during the parent–teacher meeting, Kiyotaka said he would be changing classes," said Ayanokouji. "In other words, he'll be in a different class from your son from now on, President Kouenji. It would appear that they will be competing against each other."

That fact was something only Ayanokouji knew at this current

point in time. Even Chairman Sakayanagi expressed surprise at this.

"I-is that true, Ayanokouji-san?" he asked.

"It is," Ayanokouji answered. "I have no doubt, because I heard it directly from my son."

"You're telling me that even though he was finally able to be promoted to Class A, he's moving to a lower class...?" asked Sakayanagi.

"My son is extremely talented," said Ayanokouji. "He comes up with ideas that ordinary people can't even think of and then executes them. I assume that he must have no equal at this school, so he's setting a hurdle for himself to clear."

If Kouenji saw his own son as capable, this would be a clever provocation, but Ayanokouji's gambit was more effective than he had imagined.

"I see. I had a feeling there was something interesting going on, but..." Kouenji trailed off before shifting to address the principal. "Mr. Sakayanagi?"

"Y-yes?" replied Sakayanagi.

"When Mr. Ayanokouji's son does indeed transfer classes, would you mind passing a message on to my son?" asked Kouenji.

"Not at all," replied Sakayanagi. "What would you like me to tell him?"

"As a condition for granting him true freedom, I'm ordering him to maintain the position of Class A with his current class and graduate with that title. If you could tell him that, I'm sure he'll understand. Now, it appears that, as chance would have it, your son and mine will fight," said Kouenji, turning to Ayanokouji.

"I-I understand, but why do such a thing?" asked Sakayanagi.

"I do not know which class Mr. Ayanokouji's son will be transferring to, but the idea of intentionally starting over from a disadvantageous position is interesting. At the very least, it is worthy of curiosity," Kouenji said. "Besides, it is better to give my son some trials to face. I don't know if he'll rise to the challenge, though."

"May I interpret that to mean that, through my son, you are giving your own the opportunity of sparring against an opponent of higher skill than himself?" asked Ayanokouji. "It certainly isn't a bad idea to let him see there are walls that cannot be overcome, President Kouenji."

"Even if he's still a fledgling, I am giving Rokusuke a suitable education," said Kouenji, his eyebrow twitching in the face of evergreater provocation.

"I see. So, are you suggesting that their positions are actually reversed? I suppose it is only natural for you to value your own beloved son quite highly, but the same is true for me. However, we do not have sufficient data to judge which is superior," said Ayanokouji, continuing before anyone else could open their mouth to interrupt. "May I propose a bet? If Kiyotaka prevents the class your son is in from graduating from Class A, I would like you to meet with me again. Furthermore, I would like for it to be a one-on-one meeting, without anyone else in the way."

Regardless of the titles held by adults, both sides were competing over the excellence of their sons. Upon hearing this proposal, the corners of Kouenji's mouth curved up into a smile for the first time.

"It would seem that you're a surprisingly interesting man after all, Mr. Ayanokouji. Very well. However, should your son fail, you will resign from your seat on the Diet. Forever. Is that all right with you?" asked Kouenji.

Ayanokouji's expression turned stern for an instant upon hearing those terms. Silence followed, and once again a smile tugged at the corners of Kouenji's mouth.

"Just a joke," Kouenji amended. "You don't need to take what I said so seriously. Well, actually, I suppose I should just say that it was a mature and composed decision on your part not to have responded immediately."

Kouenji dryly clapped his hands a few times. Although Ayanokouji had a hunch that he should've answered yes, in reality, he made a calm decision. While he was sure that Kiyotaka could win when it came to individual ability, it was clear that he wasn't concerned about Class A, and he was much less sure of what Kiyotaka was trying to accomplish at school. He was also concerned about the possibility, however slight, that word would get out if he had carelessly accepted, and that Kiyotaka would rejoin Kouenji.

"You are a very magnanimous man, aren't you, Kouenji-san?" said

Kijima.

It was an unlikely scenario, but Kijima's biggest supporter might possibly be taken in by an adversary. Kijima posed that question while appearing not to care about how the conversation progressed. Or, rather, sounding deeply interested but only as a bystander.

"Life needs its pleasures," said Kouenji.

"You are absolutely right," said Ayanokouji.

"I will be leaving Japan once again," Kouenji said. "Please contact me once you see the results. If your son wins, I will happily return home."

"I will be sure to contact you with the results, President Kouenji," declared Kijima instantly, as though he were acting as a witness.

8.5

AFTER LEAVING THE SCHOOL, Ayanokouji got into the back seat of the blacked-out sedan that was waiting for him outside of the main gate.

"Hello, sir. How was Prime Minister Kijima?" Tsukishiro asked over his shoulder from the driver's seat.

"He's a cunning man," Ayanokouji answered. "I could tell that he's quite capable."

However, Ayanokouji couldn't get a complete measurement of his talent. There was only one thing he was certain of: He couldn't see the limit of that talent. Even so, for Ayanokouji, his efforts this afternoon had certainly borne fruit.

"I suppose that's because he is, at any rate, governing the NCP, where demons nest," replied Tsukishiro.

Having had channels of communication with the NCP for many years now, Tsukishiro understood that quite well.

"I thought I could stir things up a bit more if I were to meet him in person," said Ayanokouji.

"Many people are fooled by his unremarkable appearance, but he

is undeniably the real thing. Even so, you must have forcefully instilled in them a sense of your presence, yes?"

"To a politician, their pride is as valuable as their life," Ayanokouji said, motioning for Tsukishiro to go ahead and start driving, before crossing his arms. "I'm sure he must have thought that he could make me obedient by breaking my will."

Although Kijima had made several indirect attempts, they didn't land with Ayanokouji.

"That must have been somewhat of a miscalculation on Prime Minister Kijima's part, I imagine. You have no pride to protect, after all," said Tsukishiro. "By the way, while you were visiting the school, I watched the video of the special exam from the other day, and your son looks to be progressing quite well. His ability to exploit women's emotions without hesitation must be something he has inherited from you."

Tsukishiro had secretly contacted school officials in advance to obtain footage of the exam, which Ayanokouji had watched in anticipation of today's events. That was precisely why he was able to handle Kijima tossing out information that should have been new without getting shaken.

"If there is something that can be used, he will use it in order to survive. It's just the way he was educated," said Ayanokouji.

"It was challenging work getting our hands on the data, but there is nothing further to gain from holding onto it," said Tsukishiro. "There shouldn't be any problem if we dispose of it, wouldn't you say?"

Once they were at a traffic light, Tsukishiro picked up the flash drive and briefly held it where Ayanokouji could see it from the back seat, before snapping it in two. He then placed it in the trash bin mounted on the cup holder located in the center console.

"So, how was the other one? President Kouenji?" asked Tsukishiro.

"He seems more devoted to Kijima than I had imagined," answered Ayanokouji. "I'm certain that their relationship wasn't created overnight."

Also, as an individual, Kouenji possessed a keen sense of smell that could not be underestimated.

"The prime minister has powerful backup, in addition to his own capabilities. The NCP will be safe and secure for the next ten years," said Tsukishiro.

"Provided nothing happens, sure. However, in this world, no matter how high your position, no matter how capable you are, you cannot defy the natural way of things, and sometimes, people fall before the unexpected..."

"There is always shadow beyond the light. That kind of thinking really is very you, Ayanokouji-san."

"Besides, there was an unexpected boon, too."

"Oh ho. A boon?"

If Kiyotaka defeated the class that Kouenji's son was registered to, he would get to meet Kouenji. It was a bet made for fun, but there was no doubt that if Kiyotaka actually pulled it off, Kouenji was the sort of man who would keep his promise. If Ayanokouji got the opportunity to engage him in a proper dialog without anyone interfering, it would be a once-in-a-lifetime chance for Ayanokouji to entice him.

"I never imagined it would be a possibility that Kiyotaka would be useful to me in the future," Ayanokouji said. "I suppose you really don't know anything unless you try, after all."

Ayanokouji wasn't getting his hopes up, but even so, he also wasn't going to pass up even a single opportunity if good fortune unexpectedly crossed his path.

Chapter 9: Celebration

As I WAS CHECKING the news on my phone after getting dressed, the sound from my rice cooker announcing that my rice had finished cooking reached my ears. I had been skipping cooking meals for the past week, eating out or picking up stuff from the convenience store, but I was starting to cook meals for myself again as of today. When I opened the lid of my rice cooker, the aroma of cooked rice gently wafted out. This appetite-arousing smell was caused by something called carbonyl compound, produced by the reaction between the amino acids resulting from the decomposition of the proteins contained in the rice, and the sugars resulting from the decomposition of the starch.

I picked up a rice bowl in my left hand and a paddle in my right. Then, I put a standard serving of rice into a bowl and placed that on the tray. *Next, another rice bowl and a small portion of*— I unconsciously gripped the empty air with my left hand.

"I suppose that's no longer necessary," I thought aloud.

It appeared that there were still vestiges of the habits that had been drilled into me over these past few months. I put some side dishes and miso soup on the tray and then carried it to the living room table. Thinking back, my room had become considerably more barren compared to just a few days ago. Over the course of our relationship, the amount of Karuizawa's personal belongings in my room had increased little by little, day by day. It wasn't surprising then that once all of her things suddenly disappeared, the room went back to how it was originally.

A few of Karuizawa's friends—Satou, Sonoda, and Ishikura—had come to pick up the personal effects that had accumulated in my room. Karuizawa probably didn't feel like she could bring herself to meet me face-to-face yet, but it was good that she had friends who could help her. Among them, Satou seemed like she was still particularly concerned about whether Karuizawa had really been the one to dump me, but even so, the cover story had remained unchanged. The pick-up ended with repeated explanations that I was the one who was dumped.

I'm sure Satou knew that it would be insensitive to strongly, repeatedly deny it. This was the best choice. Karuizawa Kei was a girl who, while having an awkward side, was blessed with good looks, good friends, and a good position in the class. I, on the other hand, was more of a social outcast. For someone like Karuizawa, it would be nothing but a stain on her future if either of us said that I had been the one to break up with her. In fact, Karuizawa hadn't done anything wrong.

As I was eating breakfast with the television on, my phone's screen lit up.

"Good morning. If you can spare some time today, could we meet?"

That message appeared on the screen. Just when I thought about actually opening the message so the status would be changed to "read" by the time I finished eating, another one arrived.

"Your girlfriend dumped you, so your schedule should be wide open, right?"

"I guess word reached Horikita's ears too, huh?" I remarked.

I had thought that the news would've taken a little longer to spread since it happened during spring break, when there was no school, but...it seemed that the girls' gossip network rivaled the speed of light. Since it appeared I had no other choice, I picked up my phone and typed an answer.

"I can meet any time after 10."

"Okay then, let's meet in the café in Keyaki Mall at 11."

With just a few simple replies back and forth, it was decided that we would be meeting up.

9.1

I MET UP WITH HORIKITA, who had been waiting for me at the entrance of Keyaki Mall, and we went to the café. Unfortunately, the café was bustling today, and all of the seats were taken, with several people waiting.

"Guess we're out of luck," sighed Horikita.

"We can wait or go somewhere else. I'm fine either way," I replied.

When I asked Horikita if she wanted to put our names on the waiting list, she gestured like she was unsure.

"Okay then. Let's go somewhere else. Would a random bench somewhere be fine?" suggested Horikita.

I told her that I didn't mind, so we left the café to look around. We soon spotted an unoccupied bench by the vending machines, near the restrooms on the second floor, and sat down together.

"I'll treat you to something," said Horikita.

"Oh, is that so?" I asked. "I would want to get treated at the café, though, if I have the option. Let's head back."

"I'm not treating you at the café. Still want to head back?"

"I see," I replied after a pause.

"Okay then, what do you want? Of course, I won't stop you if you intend to buy something with your own money."

"I'll have an unsweetened coffee. Hot."

If I gave her any back talk, she wasn't going to treat me to anything, so I figured I'd just come out and make my request. To be honest, I wanted to make every single yen count, because I could sense that I was going to be low on money in the future. Horikita bought two identical cans from the vending machine and handed me one of them.

"Take it while it's hot," said Horikita. "This should warm your lonely heart."

"Was that meant as consolation, or instigation?" I asked.

"Hm, I wonder..." replied Horikita.

I pondered for a moment, but, no...that was most definitely meant as instigation. After staring at me for a moment, Horikita tilted her head in blatant curiosity.

"Is it true that you and Karuizawa-san broke up?" she asked. "I honestly can't believe it."

"I don't really have anything to hide, so I'll answer: Yes, it's true. Where'd you hear it from anyway?" I asked.

"Kushida-san told me, in rather high spirits, that you got dumped.

Kicked to the curb. Should I tell you specifically what she said?" asked Horikita.

"Sure, if only for my own reference," I replied. I wanted to confirm how this information was being spread, so that I could keep my story straight in the future.

"She said things like you were desperately clinging to Karuizawasan's leg while bawling your eyes out, saying that you didn't want to break up, and so on," answered Horikita.

I felt like that was a bit of a stretch. No, scratch that, I felt like that was some real embellishment...

"I would find it hard to believe, since you're always so calm and collected, but I guess it could be true," said Horikita.

"Well, that's—"

"I'm kidding," Horikita said. "I don't think even Kushida-san knows what happened when you two actually broke up."

I had chosen to go to a private karaoke room to avoid any chance of being seen. Of course, if Karuizawa was explaining it that way, I would have no other choice but to go along with it. Still, I felt relieved that it was a joke, because I had felt the urge to deny that part of the narrative. Although I was prepared to deal with it to a certain extent, there were limits. Truly, she was helping me learn about myself.

"In any case, I wasn't a good fit for her," I replied.

"Really? I don't know, I didn't really get that impression, though. I thought that Karuizawa-san cared for you a great deal," said Horikita.

"Women are good actresses, I guess. Or it's possible that she could've found a better partner," I replied.

"I guess I can't rule out such a possibility, but..."

"What? You've got a strange look in your eye."

"I was kind of looking forward to seeing you all depressed, but you seem like you're completely fine."

If that was all, then a text message or a phone call would've sufficed.

"So you went through the trouble of asking me to meet with you just to see the look on my face?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Horikita.

She could be so mean-spirited sometimes.

"Well, I'll just leave it at that then, since it would be boorish of me to say anything on the matter of relationships between men and women," said Horikita.

"Please do," I replied.

Then, Horikita finally got down to business. "What I wanted to talk about was, well, right after the special exam ended, there was the matter of Maezono-san, and it didn't feel like we could honestly be happy about how things played out, right? Even now, I feel like everyone's kind of walking on eggshells."

"You might be right," I answered. "They're only concerned about how things are rough for the other classes."

After all, it would have been strange if they had been unreservedly jubilant over that kind of victory, but now, all everyone was talking about was what was going on in the lower-ranked classes.

"Yes," she replied, "Which is why I wanted to have a little promotion celebration with everyone in class, before we move up to our third year."

"A promotion celebration?"

"That's what I'm calling it, but it's just a simple thing. Like, we would all get together and say cheers, or something. With how things are, it's kind of difficult for other students to come out and say anything, right?"

"Yeah," I replied as I considered the idea, since it sounded like she wanted my opinion.

This time, Maezono had been expelled from school, which was ostensibly the price we paid for winning. This somewhat awkward, prickly vibe continued to hang over the class, even as we approached spring vacation. Horikita thought that if she could eliminate that, or even just reduce it, then that would be ideal.

"It's not a bad idea..." I mused. "No, actually, it's a good idea. But where are you going to do it?"

"Well, if we're going to have close to forty people getting together, it's possible we could disturb others if we pick the wrong place, right? Which is why I'm thinking of having it in the school classroom on one of our holidays. As for money, there'd just be the cost of drinks. What do you think about having it next Friday?"

Since there were no club activities on that day, it would be the perfect time and place to meet. All that remained was to see whether the school would agree to it.

"I can get behind that," I replied.

"Will you come?" she asked.

"I don't have any reason to refuse."

"I see. That's good to hear." She seemed relieved at that, but then her expression darkened a little. "However, there is one more thing—the reason I called you here. You might think I'm being audacious, though."

Horikita was silent for a few seconds after that little introduction, but then she spoke once again, apparently with some difficulty.

"I was a little worried, about whether your heart was okay," she said.

"My heart?"

"You prioritized winning for the sake of the class. As a result, Maezono-san was expelled. You've been burdened with a lot of responsibility for that, in making that decision."

"I'm the one who said I wanted to take the position of general. It's not really necessary for you to worry about it, Horikita."

"It wasn't just this time, either. You've helped the class before by taking on burdensome roles that no one else would take, like with what happened with Sakura-san, right?" Horikita looked at me, and I thought her eyes were quivering, albeit only slightly. "I've always been putting a tremendous burden on you, all because I'm weak..."

"All of those were things I just went ahead and did on my own. There's no need for you to feel responsible at all," I replied.

"I do feel responsible," she said. "I can't help but feel responsible. Yet I also understand that I'm not capable enough. In that case, I want to at least support your heart. If you're feeling pain, I want you to talk about it honestly with me, and let me care for you."

It wasn't like I couldn't understand what she was trying to say. It

was certainly true that many other students would likely be emotionally distressed if they did the same things as I did. Unfortunately, such feelings did not exist within me. What was efficient and what was inefficient? Who to eliminate and who to keep? I made decisions like a machine. It wasn't necessary for Horikita to understand such feelings, nor did I think I wanted her to. Well, I figured that even if I did actually tell her the truth here, she would probably decide that I was just putting up a tough front.

"I understand what you're trying to say, but I'm fine," I said. "However, if things do get tough, I'll be sure to talk to you about it."

"Really?" said Horikita.

"Sorry for making you worry," I replied.

"No, not at all, it's..." she paused for a long moment. "I just wanted to be useful to you is all."

"That's a statement that could potentially lead to misunderstandings."

"...Misunderstandings?" she repeated, cocking her head to the side, as if to say that she didn't understand what that was supposed to mean.

"I thought it sounded kind of like you were asking me out or something."

"E-excuse me?" blinked Horikita.

"Like, now that I'm officially on the market again, you were putting yourself out there as a potential girlfriend candidate. Like that?" I explained.

By laying it out in plain terms, Horikita finally seemed to understand what I was trying to say, prompting a weary sigh.

"You went and said something incredibly stupid," huffed Horikita, glaring at me.

"That came out of me acting tough, to hide the heartache I feel over being dumped, rather than all the business about expulsion and such. Forgive me."

"It sure didn't look that way, which is what I don't understand," she sighed once more.

We continued chatting after that, even after the last drops of our

After parting ways with Ayanokouji, who was going to stop by the bookstore, Horikita headed back to the dormitory alone. A warm spring breeze suddenly blew past, ruffling her long hair.

"A potential girlfriend candidate, huh?" Horikita thought aloud.

While she thought that it was an incredibly ridiculous joke, she once again reflected on the past. She realized that it had already been two years since she had met Ayanokouji. It wasn't so surprising then that they had become friends who could frivolously banter without it feeling unnatural. Even so, there was still something that bothered her.

"He's the only one I've become able to talk to like that," she murmured.

That was because Horikita couldn't talk to anyone else the way she was able to with Ayanokouji. The same was true for Kushida, Ibuki, and the rest. There was a part of her that didn't let her fully drop her guard. She realized that there was something in Ayanokouji that didn't apply to her other classmates and friends: that he was closer to her than anyone else, and he continued to watch over her. Also, that over these past two years, she had broken down those walls she had, but only with him.

"It's not like that makes us boyfriend and girlfriend," she huffed.

That's ridiculous. Right when that thought crossed her mind, Horikita felt a slight uptick in her heartbeat. It was a minor physical sensation that likely would've gone unnoticed if her surroundings had been noisy.

"What was that just now...?" she wondered.

Something she had never experienced before: a feeling in her chest, a feeling that something was off.

Anxiety?

That question popped up in her mind, but she quickly brushed it away, telling herself that wasn't it. In that case, what was making her heart beat faster now? She thought back to the words that Ayanokouji,

now out of sight, said earlier when he was trying to act tough.



"Like, you were putting yourself out there as a potential girlfriend candidate. Like that?"

A condescending, arrogant attitude that was incomprehensible. Moreover, why should she put herself forward as a candidate to go out with someone she didn't even like? What did 'like' even mean? What did 'not liking' someone mean? Horikita wondered if she even understood those things, as someone who had never really been conscious of the opposite sex before now.

"Come on now, it was a joke to start with, so there's no point in thinking about it seriously. It's just bizarre," said Horikita.

Horikita tried to shake off those impure thoughts from her mind, but she couldn't get rid of them, nor the sort of hazy, uncertain feeling that she couldn't properly describe.

"No. Let's stop thinking about this," said Horikita, trying to empty her mind to stop herself from spinning her wheels.

Chapter 10: The Promised Night

Now, we go back in time a little bit, from the beginning of April to the end of March. On this day, since I had to spend some time in the morning to take care of something, I started the day's activities before 7 a.m. Once eight o'clock rolled around, a news program came on the television that was on in the room. With the news playing like background music in my room, I sent a message off to Ichinose.

"I'll be out until three this afternoon, but I would like you to come to my room any time you want after that."

The message didn't contain any specific details. There was a promise that I didn't mention, because I didn't need to explain it in detail at this point, after it had been reiterated several times since being made last year. Of course, it was true that the situation had changed significantly before and after the End-of-Year Special Exam. Ichinose apparently got a fever after the exam and entered spring without even making an appearance at the closing ceremony. She hasn't been seen outside even once since then. This damage I had dealt her was great, and that deep wound was still healing, even now.

The message I sent her didn't show up as read. Was she sleeping? Or was she awake and pretending not to notice? Or was it something else altogether? I decided to call her to make sure, but the phone didn't even ring. All I got was a standardized voice message, the kind that played if the phone wasn't turned on or if it didn't get any signal.

"Get in touch with me once you see this."

I decided to send that short message as an addition. Ichinose most definitely understood that today was the day. On top of that, if it seemed like I wouldn't be hearing from her at all today, then I would probably have to make the decision to end this on my own. Glancing over at the television, I saw that the weather report was on, proclaiming that it would be sunny in the afternoon but that heavy rain was expected to continue through the night and until dawn. While I was busying myself by cleaning my room for a while, I received a phone call. For a moment, I thought that it was Ichinose calling me back, but

apparently not.

"Hello?" I began.

"'Sup, Ayanokouji! Hey, come on out now, buddy! Let's hang!"

Ishizaki spoke in such a loud voice that I couldn't help but hold my phone away from my ear.

"Right now?" I replied. "It's still only a little past eight, though?"

"C'mon, dude, who cares what time it is? It's spring break, man. I got stuff I wanna talk to you 'bout."

"Well, sure, I guess... I can spare about an hour or so. Where are we going?" I asked.

He pondered my question on the other end of the line for a moment, as if he hadn't yet decided on where we'd actually be meeting.

"An hour's fine. As for where, uh, I guess just outside for now. Outside, yeah."

It was such a sloppy, lackadaisical invitation that I suspected there wasn't actually any reason for us to meet.

"At least decide an actual location."

"Aw, hell, dude. Okay, uh, then, outside the dorm...err, wait, yeah, I got it, man. Let's meet at Keyaki Mall!"

Keyaki Mall? Well, naturally, it would be closed at this time of day, so no one could enter. However, that would make it a surprisingly appropriate place for students to have a confidential chat, since no one would be there.

"Got it," I replied.

"Hell yeah! Okay, think I'll get there in like ten minutes. Later, dude."

With that, Ishizaki one-sidedly ended the call. He was almost frighteningly excited for how early in the morning it was. Well, I figured I'd learn what this was about once I got there.

10.1

immediately left the dormitory and headed to Keyaki Mall, as designated by Ishizaki.

"Now then..." I muttered.

Cell phone in hand, I searched the area for Ishizaki, but I couldn't see anyone yet. Even after another five minutes had passed, there was still no sign of the person who had called me here, and just when I was wondering whether I should try contacting him or continue to wait in silence, my thoughts were interrupted.

"Ayanokouji-kun."

I was approached by none other than Shiina Hiyori. To my knowledge, the only thing she had in common with Ishizaki was that they belonged to the same class.

"Good morning. This is quite a coincidence," she said.

"Sure is," I replied.

Although I answered in agreement to go along with it, I wondered if it really was a coincidence. Running into a classmate of the person who had invited me to meet at Keyaki Mall, at this time of day? I couldn't imagine something like that was highly probable.

"Um, well, to tell you the truth, I received a call from Ishizakikun... I don't quite understand what is going on, but I was just wondering, did you perhaps get a call from him too, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Yep," I replied easily, since it seemed like we were on the same page. "I just got a call from him earlier. He didn't tell me what this was about though."

"Yeah, same here," she brought her palms together, looking pleased, or perhaps relieved. "I wonder what in the world this is all about."

"I'd like to think it's nothing bad, but..."

"Whoa! Damn, you guys're fast!"

While Hiyori and I exchanged looks, Ishizaki approached with that cheery declaration.

"I thought you were the one who said you'd be here in ten minutes," I replied.

"Yeah, man, it's like, I went out with just one shirt on, and I was like, wow, damn, it's pretty cold. So I went back inside, but then, I ran

into a buddy o' mine on the way, and...well..." Ishizaki paused briefly. "Anyway, who cares 'bout all that. No biggie. I'm here, it's all cool."

"It's 'no biggie,' huh?" I replied. "Well, I guess you're right about that, sure."

Fundamentally speaking, it was usually the person arranging the meeting that would be on time or earlier. Perhaps I was just too accustomed to that idea and was a little overly sensitive to it.

"Right?" said Ishizaki.

Looking at Ishizaki as he nodded with a smile, I suddenly had a thought. Relationships between people may change day by day, but I became increasingly accustomed to them over time... Well, rather, I felt like I had become closer, on more intimate terms. I had experienced similar emotions in the past when dealing with Ishizaki, but what was interesting was that I was surprised to recall the ways our relationship had changed. I didn't know if that was something that happened to everyone, or if it was something unique to me, as I had never established something that could be called a friendship before now.

"Good morning, Ishizaki-kun," said Hiyori, giving him a proper greeting after having warmly observed his and my conversation.

"Yeah, yeah, morning!" he exclaimed.

"So, why exactly did you call us here?" I asked.

When I urged him to get on with it, he deliberately paused, holding back his words, and then proceeded to laugh so hard that I recoiled. Then, he clenched his fist tightly and held it out in front of me.

"Now's the time to become one of us!" he shouted.

His voice reverberated throughout the early morning air around Keyaki Mall. Perhaps it was because his shout was so loud that it created an echo, but one of the birds that had been perched on a nearby tree flew away.

"I'm sorry. I think maybe I don't understand because I still haven't quite gotten into the swing of things here yet, but what on earth are you talking about?" I asked.

Without anything even remotely resembling an explanation, Ishizaki's words and actions remained incomprehensible to me.

"Come on, dude, you gotta know what I mean! When I say

become one of us, I mean change classes, dude! Transfer!" replied Ishizaki.

"You wanted to talk about that? This early in the morning, without any warning?" I asked.

"Yeah, man. It's almost April, so I thought I'd try to ask you again today," said Ishizaki, crossing his arms and nodding with self-satisfaction.

"I think that it's wonderful of you to offer, Ishizaki-kun, but Ayanokouji-kun has been promoted to Class A. Unfortunately, I don't think he would go down to a lower-level class," said Hiyori, gentry trying to convey the current situation to her classmate.

"But we ain't that far apart in terms of Class Points, right?" Ishizaki asked, unconvinced. "Ryuuen-san's gonna rocket us way past ya, at a breakneck pace. 'Sides, if our class and yours swap places in the rankings, then folks won't think too highly of ya if you move to our class after that, right, Ayanokouji? In that case, it's better if ya come on over while we're still below ya."

Ishizaki was spouting all this off very casually, without much thought, but I could see that he had a point. Normally, the standard thinking would be that a student would transfer to a new class only after that class had gotten a stable position as Class A. However, in terms of timing, this would be a bad choice for your image. In truth, I was planning to transfer to another class—just not Ryuuen's class.

"'Sides, if I didn't ask ya right now, you might get snatched up by somebody else, y'know?" said Ishizaki. Perhaps his instincts had somehow picked up on the transfer that I was planning for. "So that's why I'm askin' ya to transfer to our class right now, Ayanokouji. I know I said this a bunch o' times, but, man, if you and Ryuuen-san teamed up, then you two'd be the strongest, y'know? Right? Right?!"

It didn't really matter no matter how many times Ishizaki said "Right?" But still, the pressure he was putting on was incredible. Hiyori even looked a little impressed, perhaps somewhat convinced by his argument.

"Sorry, but that's not going to happen. Or rather, there's no need for it," I replied.

"Whaddya mean, no need?" he asked.

I was trying to think of the best way to convince him honestly, and I figured that the best method would likely be...

"This time, Ryuuen beat Sakayanagi and moved significantly closer to Class A. Which means that there's a good chance that you can win even without my help. Besides, like you said yourself, Ryuuen is going to be making great strides from here on out. In that case, there's no need for you to shore up your class any further, is there? Or are you saying that Ryuuen won't be able to win without me as an ally?" I asked.

If Ryuuen heard that, he would definitely get angry.

"No, that's not what I meant, I—!" he protested, easily able to imagine Ryuuen's fury.

"That's how this comes off," I replied, cutting him off. "You're someone close to Ryuuen, so don't doubt him. Just trust in his abilities. Besides, once you brought Katsuragi into the fold, the hole in your class was as good as filled."

Now, Ishizaki wouldn't be able to push the issue any further.

"But... But I..." he sputtered.

Ishizaki showed some resistance and choked back his words, but he would probably realize that he couldn't continue to carelessly solicit me. Since it was unthinkable that Ryuuen would choose to partner up with me in the future, you could even say that Ishizaki's invitation here was going against his leader's wishes.

"But that...that's not the only reason, dude!" he wailed, with a pained look on his face that showed he wasn't going to let this go so easily. "It's just that I like you, man! But in the future, we're gonna be fightin' each other from different classes, right? And on top of that, it's gonna be, like, close competition, yeah? Which means we're gonna totally be enemies, dude. Doesn't it? That'll mean that we'll have zero chance to hook up. On the other hand, if we do this right now, then we got Ryuuen-san, we got you, Ayanokouji, and we got Albert, and we got Shiina...we can all be friends, is what I'm sayin'. And I want all of us to have fun times together, y'know? Dude, if you just nod your head yes for me, I'm even prepared to let Ryuuen-san punch me real good!"

Despite supporting Ryuuen more than anyone else, Ishizaki was saying that, in his heart of hearts, my skills weren't the only reason he continued to invite me even at the risk of being reprimanded.

"The fact that you're saying all that, well, it's not a bad feeling," I replied. "For my part, it's not as though I dislike spending time with you and Hiyori. Actually, the truth is that in some ways, I feel more at ease with you two than I do with Horikita's class."

"Y-ya mean it?!" exclaimed Ishizaki with sparkling eyes.

However, I couldn't just keep getting his hopes up forever.

"It's just that, it's not like you can transfer classes just because of friendships," I continued "Besides, the hurdle of coming up with the Private Point cost associated with transferring is a high bar to clear, and there's the question of whether your classmates other than Ryuuen would accept it. There would naturally be opposition to it. For example, Ibuki would definitely be against it, wouldn't she?"

"Hey, man, if it's just Ibuki, I'll shut 'er up!" shouted Ishizaki.

"Ibuki was just one example. Moreover, a transfer just suddenly happening out of the blue like this is going to attract suspicion. If things went wrong, some of your classmates might think that I'm an assassin sent from Horikita's class to destroy your class from the inside once I'd transferred over," I explained.

It was precisely because of how close they were to becoming Class A that they'd likely react very strongly to something like that.

"Also, just like Hiyori said at the start of this conversation, Horikita's class has now been promoted to Class A. I would have strong reservations about going down to a lower class, since that would mean taking on a lot of big risks," I added.

"That's... O-okay, then! We'll do it this way!" shouted Ishizaki.

"Do what which way now?" I asked in return.

I had been trying to steer him toward giving up, but apparently, he was still persisting. I didn't know what kind of idea he had come up with, but whatever it was, it would be pointless. That was because I had no plans to transfer to Ryuuen's class at all, even aside from any number of concerns I might have.

"If you come to our class, you can date Shiina! How 'bout that?!" asked Ishizaki as he grabbed both my hand and Hiyori's hand and forcefully brought them together.

"H-huh?!" sputtered Hiyori.

Even Hiyori, who had been smiling warmly as she watched Ishizaki make his thoughtless pitch, was shocked by the surprise change in tactics, as one would expect.

"What kind of proposal is that?" I asked.

The fact that Ishizaki hadn't considered for a second the feelings of the two people actually involved was the very definition of audacity.

"What you don't got in your class, you got in ours! Get it?" said Ishizaki.

"You do know I have a girlfriend, right?" I asked.

"Ah hell, dude," said Ishizaki. "Ya just gotta break up with Karuizawa then, when ya change classes, right?"

"That's nonsensical," I replied.

"So, you don't like Shiina?" he asked.

"I don't dislike her, no," I replied, figuring that I would give a firm answer on the points where I could.

"Then there ain't no problem now, is there?" asked Ishizaki. "I mean, Shiina, you like Ayanokouji, dontcha?"

"Huh?!" blinked Hiyori.

"You shouldn't say things that make people uncomfortable, Ishizaki," I told him.

"Nah, dude, I ain't tryin' to make anyone uncomfortable," he said. "Y'know, it's like, they say it's better to be honest, and just come out and say things straight, with stuff like this. When it comes to these things, it's only good if you both love each other, right? It's one of those win-win situations, or whatever they call it."

That was an imposed interpretation, and no matter how you looked at it, this was a matter that Ishizaki should not be sticking his nose into.

"I don't think you should make Ayanokouji-kun uncomfortable," said Hiyori in an attempt to get Ishizaki to settle down, even while our hands were still forcibly linked together.

"It's cause I'm the kinda guy who, when I like a girl, I just go for it, with everythin' I got! Come on, dudes! Let's friggin' go!!" exclaimed Ishizaki.

"No, because..." Hiyori paused. "Ayanokouji-kun has a lovely girlfriend."

"Then what about if he broke up with Karuizawa, huh? What then, Shiina?" asked Ishizaki.

"Huh?!"

"Ain't that what this is all about? Yer sayin' that you won't make a move 'cause he's got a girlfriend, right?"

"I think it's about time you knock it off, Ishizaki," I chided. "You shouldn't embarrass Hiyori. It's awful to make her say whether she likes someone when she's right in front of them. Only a small handful of people would be able to say that they dislike someone to that person's face."



"Shiina's the type of person who says exactly what she wants to say, though,..." said Ishizaki.

Hiyori, who wasn't typically very expressive, could not hide her bewilderment and embarrassment over Ishizaki's series of tactless comments. I could feel that our hands, which were still joined together, were quickly growing warmer. It was certainly true that my impression of Hiyori had changed since we first met.

"Um...I think that's enough," I said, trying to put a stop to the situation.

She seemed to be trying to somehow get free from the hand that was grasping hers, but she couldn't shake Ishizaki off. It looked like she wasn't putting that much oomph into her attempts to shake free, but I imagined that she couldn't do it because she would have to shake him off very forcefully. So, after politely announcing that enough was enough, I proceeded to forcibly move Ishizaki's hand away, which allowed Hiyori and I to pull our hands apart. I loosened my grip on Hiyori's hand so that I could let go, but for some reason, she put a little more force into her grip now than before, when we were being forcefully brought together.

"...Hiyori?" I asked.

"Um, may I just say one thing? I thought that I would ask, since trying couldn't do any harm," she said as she gazed up at me with what seemed like a determined expression.

"N-no way, bruh! She's gonna ask you out?!" exclaimed Ishizaki.

Ignoring Ishizaki poking fun at her, Hiyori paused to take a breath, and then opened her mouth to speak.

"If you could come to our class, Ayanokouji-kun, you would be most welcome," she said. "But I suppose...that's not possible, right?"

"That's—"

I had explained the reasons why I couldn't accept the offer to transfer, in a way that even Ishizaki would understand. In Hiyori's case, she should've understood without me even needing to explain, and yet she had the courage to come out and invite me anyway.

"Oh! Nice, Shiina!" exclaimed Ishizaki. "If you're the one doin' the inviting, that's way more likely to work!"

Come to think of it, both Ishizaki and Hiyori—and I supposed Albert would have too, if he were here—were conveying more strongly than ever before that they would welcome me warmly.

"I kinda feel like this is too good for me," I replied.

That's right. It seemed like, if I didn't have to think about anything serious, a transfer to Ryuuen's class would be the most fun. Not getting involved in the business of class wins and losses, just spending the last year surrounded by good friends. That was what I had been looking for the most when I had originally enrolled in this school, and it was probably this, right here in front of me. If I just said, "Sure, thanks," I'm sure Ishizaki and the others would give me their full support.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I just can't accept," I declared.

"Yes," said Hiyori, relaxing her grip with a disappointed look. "I suppose not. Actually, I'm sorry. I ended up making an unreasonable request of you."

"Damn, man, no good, huh? Yeah, I figured. I bet you love yer current class, too. I thought you were the kind of person who wouldn't get swept up in that kinda thing, though!" said Ishizaki.

After Hiyori's attempt to persuade me fell through, which Ishizaki had counted on as his ultimate weapon, even he had no other choice but to give up.

"Again, thank you for the invitation, though," I replied. "Perhaps by this time next year, I'll come to regret not taking you up on your offer."

One more year. At this point, no one knew which class would be victorious. Even Ishizaki and Hiyori standing before me had a good chance of winning. The same was true for Horikita's class, and hopefully, the two other classes that had been pushed down from the top would be able to do the same. That's what I wanted.

I wanted to have the fight continue, leaving every class with a chance. What I needed for that was hope. If there was hope, the students would be able to push forward with all their strength until the end. That was precisely why I needed to build things up, to make that a reality. How could I keep them competing?

The answer to that would soon be clear...

AFTER I POLITELY declined the invitations from Ishizaki and

Hiyori, the three of us talked for a while rather than just going our separate ways right away. The rejection must've been a shock to them, but they didn't touch on the topic of transferring classes after that, and they seemed to genuinely enjoy just chatting about nothing. They invited me to join them again for tea once Keyaki Mall opened, but I regretfully declined the offer, as I had other business today. We split up and I returned to the dormitory at nine o'clock that morning, but I still hadn't gotten any word from Ichinose.

Then, I headed to Keyaki Mall at 10 a.m. as planned, met up with the person I had arranged to meet, and afterward spent some time together with them. By the time I returned to my room, it was past 2 p.m., and I nonchalantly passed the time for the next couple of hours. I didn't send any additional messages or make any phone calls; I simply continued to wait in my room for a response.

How was I going to spend this day? The right to choose was Ichinose's, because this was the day that would determine her fate. I wanted to leave the final move for Ichinose to make, not me. I decided to take care of cleaning my room and doing some light organizing. Then, I prepared dinner and finished eating quietly, alone.

By the time that curfew rolled around at eight o'clock, there was still no indication of any response coming my way. I saw that my messages were still not read. Even so, a final decision wasn't made, even as the curfew arrived. The reason being that, while it was forbidden for me to visit the floor where the girls lived, the rules still allowed Ichinose to come and visit me herself. Of course, that wasn't actually explicitly stated in writing, and in truth, if Ichinose was seen heading to the room of someone of the opposite sex in the middle of the night, she'd receive a warning.

Well, actually, from my time spent dating Karuizawa, I knew that all that stuff was kind of a gray area, as things like matters of prudence or the restrictions placed on men and women were formalities. There were four hours to go until the promised day was over, so I leisurely

took a shower and then enjoyed some television. The morning news had been quite interesting, but I still couldn't get into the late-night variety shows, and honestly, I just couldn't enjoy them. By the time I finished brushing my teeth, it was past nine o'clock.

"Less than three hours to go," I muttered.

For students who were early risers, this was the time they'd probably be getting ready for bed. However, the chances that Ichinose was already asleep were about as close to 0 percent as you could possibly get. She was definitely awake and racking her brain. Time passed, and it was getting later and later. By the time 9:30 p.m. came and went, I could hear the soft sound of raindrops hitting my window, but when I gently opened the window to take a look, the rain turned heavy in the blink of an eye.

Come to think of it, I recalled that today's forecast called for heavy rains to continue through the night, until dawn. Even when I closed the window, the sound of the rain reverberated quite loudly inside my room, and the rainfall was likely to get heavier still. It was now nearly ten o'clock. Everything that I needed to take care of in my room today had been completed.

So, at last, just two hours left until the day ended, huh?

I turned on my phone and checked my messages to Ichinose. There was no reply. However, I saw that something vital was different now about the messages I had sent.

"I'll be out until three this afternoon, but I want you to come to my room any time you like after that."

"Get in touch with me once you see this."

I saw that both of those messages, which I had sent to her in succession, were now marked as read. I knew it. Ichinose was awake after all, and she had read my messages. I then waited another ten, then twenty minutes, for her to respond.

However, she wasn't getting in touch with me.

Ichinose was free to alter the promised day, but her answer was... not to answer? Well, I supposed that all things considered, it was possible for her to respond that way, but honestly, I had thought she would take some kind of action. Had I simply been expecting too much? If she had chosen silence, that meant that the decision that needed to be

made was already provided.

I figured I should conclude that I had given Ichinose enough time to think about it.

However...

I slowly got up, lifting my hips off of the bed I had been sitting on.

I want to check with her directly, in person, after all.

For the past year, I have been continuously influencing Ichinose for my own sake, so it was only natural for me to want to see the results. It was fine to reject it, but I just wanted to know how she was. That desire naturally welled up in me.

Even if it means making a compromise on my side at the very last minute...let's go and find out the answer.

10.3

ONCE I MADE THE DECISION to check for myself at 10:30 p.m., I made the perilous journey. Fortunately, it was raining heavily outside, and I couldn't detect any signs of anyone out and about, not even in the hallways. Making my way from the hallway to the emergency stairwell, I reached just outside of Ichinose's room. Then, I pressed the doorbell, trying to call for her, as she must have been inside. From the other side of the door, I could hear the sound of the doorbell echoing faintly. However, even after waiting quite a while, there was no answer.

Though she had no way to know that I was the one ringing her bell, I figured that was an indication that she wasn't meeting with anyone right now, no matter who they were. I proceeded to take my phone out of my pocket and pressed the call button. She must have kept her phone on after she read my messages earlier, because the call went through.

Five rings, six rings...

Even after ten rings, Ichinose didn't answer the phone. I pressed the button to end the call and quietly knocked on her door.

"It's me. The day I promised to meet you is almost over. So, I'm

here," I told her.

I told her that with my own voice, not through my phone. Even accounting for the heavy rain outside, it was naturally a substantial risk for me to have spoken aloud here. If other girls discovered that I was paying Ichinose a visit, though there may not have been an immediate uproar, whoever found me would be obligated to report the offender, and I would be held accountable. Which was why I wasn't going to repeat the act of verbally calling out to her over and over, without end. If Ichinose still didn't respond even after this, I didn't intend to pursue it any further.

Even though I most definitely wanted to know the answer, to see it with my own eyes, I just couldn't take on such an elevated risk. I would just have to accept that this was Ichinose's answer, then. The other side of the door remained silent, even now.

"I'll wait for just three minutes. If I don't hear back from you by then, I'll leave. So don't worry," I added.

I quietly started counting down from 180 seconds. During that time, I cast my gaze at the heavy rain behind me.

Fifty seconds, forty seconds...

The remaining time was running out. Then, just when there were only thirty seconds remaining, something happened. My phone vibrated slightly, because I had received a message.

"Why'd you come?"

It was a message from none other than Ichinose, who was just on the other side of the door. If sending a message was the best she could do right now with all of her effort, then I'd respond to this message.

"I told you, didn't I? Today's the promised day."

"It's already so late, though. It's past curfew."

While I was typing a reply to Ichinose's last message, I received an additional message from her.

"The me right now, I just don't have the courage to go to your room, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm sorry."

"I know. That's why I came here."

My response back to her was marked as read immediately, but I didn't get a follow up from her, so I sent another message.

"I'll wait one more minute. If you don't open the door before that runs out, let's just pretend we never made that promise back then."

That additional message I sent was also immediately marked as read. All that was left was to see what Ichinose thought. If she disliked me and had suspicions about me but was willing to fight next year despite that, then she was free to do so. Or she could say that she was fed up with this school and that she was going to drop out. Or she could do something completely unexpected even to me. Ichinose had the right to choose, of course.

If she could just let me see her after she gave that answer, that'd be fine. Time kept ticking down while I was thinking about that, and soon there were less than ten seconds until time ran out. I was just about to message "Guess I'll go back." when my phone vibrated once again.

"The door's unlocked. Come on inside."

Unlocked?

I read that word over and over again, and for a moment, I felt like there was something off. I hadn't had to do any research to know that Ichinose hadn't been going out or meeting anyone at all lately, the gossip had reached me regardless. If that were true, then this door—the door connecting the inside and the outside—should have been locked.

Did one of Ichinose's classmates visit her after I conducted my research, and she invited them in? I could imagine all sorts of possibilities, of course, but...the chances of that seemed low. Then, was she considering the possibility that I would be the one to come and visit her today? It was hard to judge either way. If we had been speaking on the phone or face-to-face, I could've probed her for answers. Unfortunately, it was difficult to discern intent in a sterile message, and although I was a little surprised by the unexpected response, I decided not to dwell on it.

I put my hand on the doorknob, with some small degree of caution. The door really wasn't locked, and it opened smoothly. However, there wasn't any light on the other side when I opened the door; the room was enveloped in silence and darkness.

"Ichinose, are you in here?" I asked.

Even after murmuring those words, I didn't hear a response. I quietly closed the door behind me. There weren't any lights on in the

room, so I could barely see anything, and it was almost totally silent too. The only sound was the slight humming of the refrigerator's compressor.

"Ichinose?"

I tried calling to her once more, but I still didn't get any response. Since I couldn't take off my shoes and go further in, I decided to just quietly wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. As my eyes gradually became accustomed to the darkness and my field of vision began to widen, I was able to spot a downcast Ichinose in a corner of the room, clutching her knees.

"It's past curfew. Aren't you worried?" asked Ichinose.

"I should be asking you the same thing," I replied. "Now that you invited me in, you're liable too, Ichinose."

"...Yes, you're right," she replied after a beat. It sounded more like her natural voice, which I hadn't heard in quite a while. She also seemed to be in better spirits than I had expected, and she didn't appear to be sick. "You must have cared more deeply about this day than I imagined, Ayanokouji-kun, if you took on all this risk to come here and visit me."

She paused again.

"But it wasn't for me, it was for your own sake... Right, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

Even Ichinose had to understand that much by now.

"Yeah," I replied without hesitation, nodding my affirmation.
"This is something I decided a year ago. Today is the day that I will take care of the student known as Ichinose Honami, if you know what I mean."

I used an expression that might provoke someone to say something like "What do you mean 'take care of' me?! What're you suddenly saying that for?!"

"Take care of me..." she murmured. "In just which way do you mean that?"

She didn't sound angry or upset. In this context, many people would assume the worst when they heard the phrase "take care of." That was because they would interpret it as them being a problem that needed to be solved, or otherwise eliminated. However, the phrase also

had another meaning, the opposite meaning: to accompany and care for someone.

"We're going to find that out right now," I replied.

"I see..."

"If you don't mind, can I come in?" I asked.

"...Go ahead," she finally answered. "Just lock the door behind you, please."

It was unlikely that any visitors would be coming at this hour, but one could never be too careful. Following her instructions, I locked the door, took off my shoes, and stepped into her room proper. Her room was incredibly neat and tidy, so it didn't seem like there was any danger of me tripping on anything, even with the lights off. I drew closer to her, stopping once I got to a point where I could see Ichinose as clearly as possible in the darkness.

"I thought you might feel that you didn't want to see me, or that you never wanted to see my face again. Even so, I wanted to talk to you today. This might be the last chance we get to take our time and talk," I told her.

"You mean...completely severing our whole relationship. We won't even be able to be friends anymore. Right?" said Ichinose.

"I won't deny that," I answered. "If I decide that's what's best for the both of us, then I'll have to do what's necessary."

The first thing to come out of Ichinose's mouth, her statement about just being friends, could've just been brushed off as wishful thinking. If that was the worst-case scenario in Ichinose's mind, then it was time for her to learn how naively optimistic her judgment was. What I was about to tell her was horribly cruel.

"Is there anything you want to tell me first? If not, I'm going to give you my answer," I added.

If it wasn't necessary to engage in any frivolous small talk, then it was best to get right down to business.

"...No," she said after steeling herself for a moment, without even looking at me. "You can tell me."

"The results of the End-of-Year Special Exam were a crossroads of destiny. If your class lost, Ichinose, then it would become nearly impossible for you to recover. You could say that it was a battle you absolutely could not afford to lose. However, it ended in victory for Horikita's class. In other words, your path to Class A has been cut off," I declared.

"Yeah, you're right. I think there are still a lot of kids in the class who haven't given up yet, but I feel like it's impossible...because I couldn't beat you, Ayanokouji-kun. Because of that, I crushed everyone's dreams," she said.

"That's true. Your class lost because you, their leader, were weak. That responsibility is significant, but if it's a matter of just assigning blame, then anyone can point fingers. There would be no need for me to come here and 'take care of' you."

Although still downcast, she still seemed to be braced as if she were mentally prepared, and my words didn't shake her.

"Yet surprisingly enough, your hopeless class does have a chance to rebuild, Ichinose," I remarked.

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say. Isn't our path to Class A cut off...?" she asked.

"Yes...as long as you remain the class leader, that is, Ichinose."

Just then, for the first time since this conversation began, Ichinose's shoulders began to tremble slightly.

"I suppose...that means you're telling me to step down as the class leader," she answered softly.

"If you want your class to win, yes. Immediately," I answered.

"Yes, you're right..." Ichinose trailed off, clutching her knees much tighter as she curled in on herself. "In that case, I'm sure that day will come in the not-too-distant future. Since I'm no longer anywhere near qualified or even confident enough to lead the class, after all..."

"Sorry, but that's not all I meant," I said. "You obviously have to step down as leader, of course, but beyond that, it'll be necessary to replace you with someone who can guide the class to victory into the leadership position."

"A leader who can guide the class? Who do you have in mind...? Kanzaki-kun?" she asked.

"Nobody," I answered. "There is no one in your class as of now

who is capable of turning things around, Ichinose."

"If that's the case, then...it's impossible from the get-go."

"If someone like that doesn't exist in your class, Ichinose, you just have to bring them in from another class."

"What...do you mean...?" she asked tentatively.

"I will transfer to your class and become the new leader."

There were strategies that I had been working out all this time. I was confessing one of them to Ichinose, right here and now.

"You will, Ayanokouji-kun...?" Ichinose asked hesitantly.

"You already know what I am capable of, for better or worse," I replied. "Closing the five-hundred-point-gap between your and Horikita's class won't be an easy battle, but if I have a year, I can overtake them with time to spare."

"Your class just got promoted to Class A, and now you're going to throw it all away and come to a low-level class...?" asked Ichinose.

"I figure that's something that people couldn't normally understand, but don't worry. If I can make the transfer happen, I can fulfill your wish and make your class graduate from Class A," I explained.

Ichinose, who had been hugging her knees since I came in, looked up for the first time. I had thought her face might've been puffy and swollen from crying her eyes out, but that didn't appear to be the case.

"Oh...I see. Yes, I suppose that's how it would work..." said Ichinose.

She slowly looked up at me, and she appeared to have just realized something that she was nonetheless deeply certain of. I wondered if, in her eyes, she saw me as a hitman who had come here to bump her off.

"I guess it must've been a foregone conclusion that you would beat me in the End-of-Year Special Exam, Ayanokouji-kun. Something that was already set in stone before we even started, since you wouldn't be able to make this proposal if I had ended up winning..." In the event that Ichinose won, there would've been almost no difference in Class Points between hers and the other classes, putting them in a state of equilibrium, leaving me with no need to have transferred classes. So, putting it that way, she was half right.

"I won't deny that certainly seems to be the case. Still, if you could have beaten me and shown me that you were capable so that I wouldn't feel the need to do this, I would've welcomed that outcome," I explained.

Which meant that I honestly would've come to take care of her in the sense of helping out.

"I see..." she murmured. "Still, this doesn't sound like a bad thing. Not for our class as a whole, anyway. If you are fighting in my place, and aiming for Class A, I'm sure that'll make everyone really happy."

"I agree," I replied, "but you have some inkling of what I'm getting at, don't you?"

"Yeah..." Ichinose said. "I'm sure there must be some conditions though, right?"

If Ichinose stepped down as the leader and I took her place, that wouldn't be enough to count as me taking care of her.

"I will transfer to your class and make sure that they graduate from Class A. However, my condition is that you, Ichinose Honami, drop out of this school."

That was my sole condition. If she simply accepted it, then an accord would be reached.

"That I drop out,..." she repeated.

What would Ichinose think of that condition? How would she act? I had been burning with curiosity about those questions since this morning. This was the turning point in a number of strategies. I had already made predictions about the scenarios of the answers in advance, but no matter where we ended up, I wanted to leave the decision of which path to take to Ichinose herself.

"I'm sorry. I don't have enough Private Points," said Ichinose.

"Not to worry," I assured her. "Transferring classes isn't that

difficult. I'll collect all of your Private Points, of course, and we'll scrounge together more from all of your classmates. If that's still not enough, then you can borrow from first-years too. You hold the students' trust, so I'm sure that if you say that you will return what you borrow with interest, plenty of students will be willing to lend you their points. Even if it's not possible to come up with the entire twenty million, it won't be that hard to make up any outstanding difference."

Looking at it that way, the class transfer wouldn't be difficult at all. Reaching Class A would be assured for only a mere twenty million Private Points.

"Assuming it can be done, why are you going through all the trouble of this, Ayanokouji-kun? What's your goal here?" asked Ichinose.

"A graduate of this school told me to become a student who people would remember, and, at the very least, the leaders of each class are very much aware of my presence right now. No, actually, it's not just the leaders. The rest of the students are probably starting to take note of me as well," I explained.

Whether that awareness was right or wrong, good or bad, was irrelevant.

"Once this transfer is complete, I will undoubtedly become a student that people will remember," I added.

"...That is true."

"Do you remember what I told you a year ago? To keep on being who you are?"

"During that year, you'll push forward with your classmates, as far as you can go. There will be happy times and sad times along the way. And I think there will be times when you feel crushed and disheartened. But even so, don't ever stop."

And now I would tell her the true intention behind my words a year ago.

"It was to avoid damaging the value of your class," I explained. "I said that so that I could keep the forty students originally assigned to your class. Then, even if you left, someone else could join the class, and

they could start their third year with the same number of students: forty."

It was to control and manage the starting condition of the class, with my own hands.

"It's because I ideally wanted to start from zero," I added.

"So if I stayed and there were forty-one, that would...distort it, right?" asked Ichinose.

"That's not the only reason, of course. Your presence would be a distraction to the class. It's because you're a person of character, and you have abilities that I cannot control," I clarified.

If Ichinose showed resistance to me, there'd probably be classmates who would take her side and would need to be dealt with as a result. If that happened, it would become a hindrance in continuing to operate a normal class.

"I understand," said Ichinose. "You're incredible, Ayanokouji-kun. You really do think of all possible scenarios."

However, this path was somewhat different from the future that I had originally envisioned. It was the result of a course correction, because Sakayanagi's departure meant that things were no longer following my initial calculations.

"If I voluntarily drop out of school, our Class Points will drop even further. Do you believe that you can still win despite that?" asked Ichinose.

"It would be tough if I fought fair with a frontal assault, sure," I admitted. "Whether I could simply accumulate eight hundred or more Class Points depends largely on the rewards offered by the school. However, that penalty you just mentioned is the key to my strategy. If I have students from the other classes expelled, their class will be penalized. Therefore, it will be possible for me to pull it off if I close the gap not only with the points I'll receive, but with the points I'll be taking away from my opponents."

Ichinose's own skills weren't enough to have her friends to graduate from Class A. However, she could make that happen if she took responsibility by withdrawing from school voluntarily. Ichinose, who felt a great deal of responsibility for having lost, would likely narrow things down to only two choices in her mind. This was truly the

final turning point.

"So, if I drop out of school, you'll really...get them to A?" said Ichinose.

"I promise," I replied.

That was the truth. I was negotiating with the intention of leading Ichinose's class to Class A.

"In that case, I—"

"Hold on, Ichinose," I cut her off. "I'm going to tell you this first because it's important. I will most definitely lead everyone to Class A. However, I can't guarantee that anyone other than me will graduate, and that goes for all thirty-nine of your classmates."

"Huh...?" she blinked.

"It's only natural. I can't afford to be wasteful from now on, if I'm going to catch up with the other classes. So if I feel that a student is unnecessary, I will simply have to cast them aside. In order to regain Class Points now that we're so low-ranked, one of my top priorities is to eliminate weak points. If I have a chance to use a special exam to force a student to be expelled, I will use it, without hesitation. Furthermore, I won't discriminate, even if that student is someone close to you, like Amikura or Watanabe. I'll do the same thing I did like when I erased Maezono from Horikita's class," I explained.

It was a fact that I had used Maezono and had her expelled in the process. Ichinose experienced the reality of that firsthand, a reality that didn't allow her to dream.

"That said, it's not like I'm going to get ten or twenty students expelled. At most, only a few will disappear," I added.

Ichinose now had two options. One was to accept the proposal I was giving her now, and accept me into her class before voluntarily withdrawing from school. The other was for her to reject my proposal and to continue being the class leader, fueled by her spite.

Well, actually, there was only one real choice at this point. That was because Ichinose Honami couldn't abandon her friends.

There was a 99-percent chance that Ichinose would stand up again as the class leader and begin to fight in earnest. Then, I would likely have no other choice but to force the staging of the battle between the four classes, whether or not the equilibrium between them could be

maintained. There was nothing to be done about that.

But what I wanted was neither one of those answers.

In all honesty, I was looking for a third answer.

I was hoping that there was a third answer, which even I didn't have.

"That's awful..." said Ichinose.

"Yeah, it is," I replied.

I was asking the impossible. Most likely, Ichinose would soon stand up, shaking with anger, having concluded that she would fight. Even so, I couldn't help but want something else. There was something I had instilled in her a year ago, on the day I decided to "take care of" Ichinose Honami. I had wanted to control the positive and negative of someone's romantic feelings, but this wasn't limited only to love. I had helped her and betrayed her, showing her affection and hostility. I had spent time with her with the aim of stirring together conflicting emotions.

Many of those positives and negatives must have been at war within Ichinose, and now, things had reached their peak. I was certain that Ichinose's feelings of affection for me had been flipped because of my betrayal. In psychological terms, her current feeling could be referred to as "ambivalence." Ambivalence was especially strong when it involved something undesirable.

I learned about the concept of ambivalence over the course of my education in the White Room, so chances were high that after this, I would see an Ichinose who had fed on her hatred and turned against me. I just wanted to see what kind of changes would take place, as an observer, and see the effects of the new experiment from up close. Ichinose was truly the perfect subject for that experiment.

Right now, her loathing would come to exceed her affection for me. The deeper the love, the stronger the hate it could become. On occasion, something like that could grow to the point of turning into a neurosis, a state of mind that couldn't be made light of. However, that could not be called a new experiment. If all I wanted was to grow her hatred and break her heart, I'd already seen those results from other experiments in the past.

What I really wanted to see was something else, a completely

different outcome.

The 1-percent answer that was unknown to me. Perhaps that was too much for me to hope for...

"I...absolutely do not want my friends to be hurt," said Ichinose.

"In that case, you'll have to keep fighting, on your own two feet," I replied.

"However, I'm sure that I can't make it to Class A," she admitted.

"So you're saying that you're going to choose to drop out and leave it to me then, after all?" I asked.

"So...either I drop out or I don't, huh? You're expecting me to choose from those answers, aren't you?"

She was right. I wasn't going to deny anything.

"However, I feel like neither of those options provides a real solution," she said.

That response was completely unexpected. What's more, it hadn't even taken her that much time, either. I couldn't help but feel like a strong jolt of excitement had rocked my brain.

"Neither will work?" I asked. "In that case, what do you think is the right choice?"

"I don't want to lose any of my friends. I *can't* lose them," she said.

"That's just idealistic and selfish," I replied.

"Yes, it is. It would surely be impossible with my abilities alone, but with you, Ayanokouji-kun, it could happen."

"So, you won't drop out, and you're telling me to transfer. Do I have that right?"

When I asked that question, Ichinose smiled warmly for the first time today and shook her head from side to side, telling me no. Then, she verbally laid out a path that I hadn't considered, which she herself had imagined, which would allow the four classes to achieve equilibrium. She had arrived at that 1-percent answer that I had been hoping for.

"Do you think that'll work?" I asked.

"Am I wrong?" she asked in return.

"Well...no," I replied.

Lost for words, I couldn't say more than that. For the classmates who adored Ichinose and wanted to achieve Class A together, there was only one possible way to graduate without losing anyone. The aspect she had disavowed as a leader, she now seized herself, with her own hands. The heights of Ichinose's potential alone could surpass that of Horikita or Ryuuen. If she could completely overcome her emotional weakness, and discard her naivete, then there really was no telling how things would turn out over the next year. I drew closer to Ichinose and offered my hand.

"To make that choice a reality, we'll need to keep each other at an appropriate distance," I told her. "We can't start without dialogue, though. Of course, the driving force can be hatred, that's fine. There's no need for you to like me whatso—"

"No, Ayanokouji-kun," she immediately cut me off and stood, still grasping my hand in hers. "This whole time I was cooped up in my room, I tried over and over again to make myself not like you, Ayanokouji-kun. Yet I just couldn't do it. I know I'm an idiot, but I just couldn't change my feelings of love for you, and no matter how many cruel words you showered me with today, Ayanokouji-kun, I still couldn't change it."

The scent of citrus gently wafted through the air... I had picked up such a scent from Ichinose, who had told me that she had been holed up here all this time. Even in the low light, I noticed that her hair color was gorgeously lustrous. Perhaps I had been greatly mistaken. I had always thought that everything today was done on my initiative, guided by me, but perhaps it was actually...

"Did you know that I would come here?" I asked.

"Yeah, I knew," she answered. "I knew that you would definitely come here to see how I was, how I felt. I knew that there was no way you could suppress that urge."

Ichinose was confident that I would pay her a visit on this day, no matter how late it might be. A message on a cell phone, which you couldn't read feelings from. A door that hadn't been locked. A clean and tidy room, and a well-groomed physical appearance, in anticipation of meeting someone. These all meant that she had prepared to receive me as a guest. I didn't think that she had seen through me to the point of knowing what I was going to propose here, but no, wait, I couldn't be

certain of that either. It wasn't unlikely at all that Ichinose had guessed what I was going to say, even if she didn't know everything.

"It's already way past curfew," Ichinose interrupted my thoughts. "If you leave my room now, someone might see you. If that happens, it might get in the way of our plans."

"Yeah, that's certainly true," I replied.

"So, can I ask you that we be in this together, as accomplices, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

She had exceeded my expectations not once, but twice. I knew it. Ichinose really was outstanding.

"How are we going to be accomplices, then?" I asked.

"I won't let there be any more unnecessary secrets between you and me, Ayanokouji-kun," she added. "I don't want us to do that."

Ichinose took hold of my hand. Without saying a word, she forcefully pulled me toward her. Then, just when I thought she was going to draw me in close, she pushed me on the chest firmly. It felt like she was telling me, "Sit down on the bed," or rather, she made me sit down. Ichinose stood in front of me, looking down at me.

"I think I understand Karuizawa-san very well," said Ichinose.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I think that she was touched by your darkness, Ayanokouji-kun, and then she was saved, and now she'll go through hell. You decided that this is necessary for Karuizawa-san, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Maybe you're right."

"That's really one-sided though, isn't it? Even if ultimately you're helping her, you can't say that's the right way to go about it, even if you're sugar-coating it. You hurt people, break them, and then rebuild them of your own accord."

Ichinose didn't know that I had already broken up with Karuizawa. However, she must have understood from the flow of things that I was planning to break up with her.

"It's the same for me too, isn't it?" she continued. "Karuizawa-san and I, we—well, no, it's the same for other students too. All of us are just dancing in the palm of your hand, Ayanokouji-kun."

Ichinose's eyes were beautiful. They were clear, yet somehow had

a darkness in them—strong, though weak, and sharp. They were eyes that showed the various changes she had undergone. They were shining even more brilliantly now. The color of her eyes was outside my calculations, and I couldn't determine whether they were light or dark.

"You—" I began, before she interrupted me by taking hold of both of my shoulders, putting her weight against me, and pushing me backward.

"Just like how you're using me, Ayanokouji-kun, I'm going to use you too. We each have that right, don't we?" asked Ichinose.

"At the very least, I can't deny you that," I replied.

"I can't change the way that I feel about you, Ayanokouji-kun. I can't change the fact that I love you, and I can't forget it either. Honestly, I wanted to see you so badly. More than any of my classmates, more than any of my family, all I can think about is you. However, it seems like that's not true for you. You don't look at me. You think more broadly, and in the end, only of yourself," said Ichinose.

Seeing right through my true feelings, Ichinose smiled at me gently.

"That's fine and all, but I'm not just gonna take it. Just like how you etched your existence deep into my heart of your own accord, I want to etch my existence deep into your heart by my own power, Ayanokouji-kun."

The bed creaked slightly as Ichinose shifted her weight to her hands on the bed. Taking my hand on hers, she moved my hand. The sound of her heartbeat, which I had no way of being able to hear, I could now feel through my hand. It was extremely fast. I could tell that she was in an extremely nervous, anxious state, and not calm at all. Outside the window, the rain was coming down with a booming intensity, causing the windowpane to flutter wildly.

"We're doing something terrible to Karuizawa-san. If she found out...it would be bad, right?" asked Ichinose.

"Sorry, but I broke up with Karuizawa before I came here," I replied. "I already took care of the risk management, since I was going to be paying a visit to a girl's room at night."

However, at the time, I was considering the possibility that she'd snare me in some socially impossible trap, out of hatred.



"I see," Ichinose replied. "I've been holed up in my room all this time, so I had no idea."

That was understandable. Besides, even if she hadn't been, there wasn't a chance for word to spread, since it hadn't happened last week or even yesterday. It was something that happened today, March 30.

"Which means that you can't use something like this as a means to threaten me," I replied, with what little I could see in the dark room obscured completely by Ichinose's body.

"I didn't mean it as a threat," said Ichinose quietly.

As she whispered those words gently into my ear, Ichinose's cheeks flushed, but she didn't change her aggressively forward behavior. She pressed her lips to mine. The force of our kiss was such that our teeth clicked against each other, and Ichinose was slightly startled.

"I'm sorry, I'm really bad at this. That was my first kiss, and, um..." she stammered.

With that, Ichinose slowly, carefully, brought her lips to mine.

"Is this right? Like this?" she asked.

"Yeah..."

"You're not going to run away...?"

"I don't have that option. Forcing an escape right now would be a significant risk."

Ichinose, her conviction now firm, had determined not to let me go. If I tried to pry her off by force, it was possible that, in the worst-case scenario, there'd be a struggle, and just a little bit of caution would not be enough to avoid the fate of boys who entered the forbidden girls' floor late at night. That was just how resolved Ichinose was, and I felt I should reward that resolve.

I put my hands on Ichinose's clothes and then began to peel them off. She froze up in hesitation for a moment, but soon relaxed, and I removed her top. You could say that we were already acting outside of logical parameters. We were entangled. From the moment I had set foot in this room, my path of retreat had been cut off. At the same time, I found myself drawn in by her charms, charms that were new to me. I had thought that I already knew what I needed to know about her, but

that might have been nothing more than the beginning.

In this room, with just the two of us, the night was pitch-black everywhere we looked.

This wasn't a ceremony to become lovers. That simply wouldn't happen between us. No, this was an absolute contract, for each of us to need and be needed by the other.

Now, we were each bound by that contract to the deepest level. Our desire for each other was insatiable.

10.4

A FEW DAYS AFTER that promised day, when Ayanokouji and Ichinose had bridged the gap between them, their spring vacation was coming to an end. It was early April at Keyaki Mall, and six students from Ichinose's class were gathered near the entrance to the café with confused expressions. A sudden message from Ichinose, who had been holed up in her room and hadn't met with or talked to anyone, had announced that she would be coming back.

It was sent to the whole class's group chat, and the message was immediately received rather enthusiastically by the peers who were hoping for her recovery. Ichinose apologized first and foremost for not returning their calls and messages, and she said that she wanted them to hear something she had to say, as she had formulated her thoughts on their future plans. A number of students had wanted to participate in that meeting, but it was none other than Kanzaki who immediately shot them down.

He suggested that the situation ought to be discussed by a small number of people, considering that they didn't even have a grasp on the current situation and the responsibility implied. Kanzaki then selected the participants, and no one raised any objections, not even Ichinose. For better or for worse, the class was still gladly willing to accept positive and thoughtful suggestions. The members called by Kanzaki included Shibata, Hamaguchi, Amikura, Himeno, Shiranami, and Watanabe. Among the seven members, there were some that made classmates wonder at their selection, and feel like something might be

amiss.

Some of the classmates included were central figures in the class, but others were not. This was because, even though Kanzaki included people who were close to Ichinose, he did so as a way to deliberately throw her off the scent of including Hamaguchi and Himeno, who would agree with his opinions. Even if, hypothetically, it came to a situation where a majority vote was to be taken during the discussion, Kanzaki believed that he would be able to secure at least three votes for his own views by doing this. Since Kanzaki didn't know Ichinose's current condition, he intended to be fully prepared to throw down the gauntlet. Kanzaki met up with Shibata on the way there, and they arrived at the café together.

"Shibata-kun, Kanzaki-kun, good morning," said Amikura.

Amikura, a female student who often spent her weekdays and days off together with Ichinose, and was close enough to her that you could describe her as Ichinose's best friend, had been the first to arrive. She greeted Kanzaki and Shibata as soon as they appeared.

"Oh, hey, Amikura, mornin'. Man, sure am glad though, right, Amikura?" asked Shibata. "About getting a message from Ichinose."

"Yeah, seriously!" Amikura replied. "I literally almost cried a little when I got the message."

Ichinose hadn't met with anyone since their class had lost the Endof-Year Special Exam. Even when her best friend Amikura went to pay Ichinose a visit in person, she was turned away at the door and with the explanation that it was hard to talk to anyone at the moment. Other people in class continued to encourage Ichinose with messages, but they wondered if perhaps their texts were actually having the opposite effect. Everyone was wondering if they could come up with a better way to help get Ichinose back on her feet somehow, but no one came up with a solution.

"Still, I haven't actually seen her face yet though, so I can't really say that I'm relieved or anything," Amikura said. "It sounds like she definitely went to her parent–teacher meeting, but I wonder if she'll really be able to appear in front of everybody. Is Honami-chan really going to be okay?"

Amikura feared the possibility that this meeting was going to wind up amounting to nothing. The fact that Ichinose carried the

responsibility for her class losing the End-of-Year Special Exam solely on her own shoulders was still fresh in Amikura's mind.

"Nah. If she said she'll come, she'll come," Shibata said without hesitation, having unshakable confidence in his classmate. "Ichinose is *not* an irresponsible person."

"That's true, but...she's hardly set foot outside her room," said Amikura.

She felt that it would be understandable if Ichinose couldn't muster the courage to appear in front of everyone.

"Well, supposin' that does happen, we can just overlook it. Be forgiving and all, yeah," said Shibata.

"That won't solve anything," snapped Kanzaki, breaking his silence to speak out angrily.

"What do you mean?" said Shibata.

"Our defeat in the End-of-Year Special Exam spelled the difference between light and dark for our class. She's had two weeks since that last exam, and she hasn't been able to come up with even a single strategy for the next. We can't waste any more time," Kanzaki pointed out.

"It's not just Ichinose's fault we lost though, dude," replied Shibata. "You lost as a representative too, and we participants could've contributed more as well. The entire class's responsible is what I'm sayin'."

"I'm not assigning blame. I'm saying that it is too late for us to discuss what we're going to do in the future," retorted Kanzaki.

They were already mostly through their spring vacation, and soon, they would be entering their third year. The time for preparation was ticking away, even as they discussed that fact.

"Whaddya mean, what we're going to do?" Shibata asked. "We're gonna come together and work harder than we ever have before. That's all there is to it, yeah?"

"Wrong," Kanzaki corrected him. "Our class doesn't have a chance to win anymore."

Kanzaki made that statement completely ready to antagonize Shibata and the other students, many of whom would naturally not welcome such self-defeating statements.

"What're you talkin' 'bout Kanzaki? That ain't true," said Shibata.

"Don't you see the situation yet, Shibata?" Kanzaki shot back.

"Hey, hey, come on you two, calm down, okay?" Amikura cut in to try to soothe them. "Look, Watanabe-kun and the others are here."

Looking in the direction Amikura was pointing, they could see Watanabe waving happily. Behind him were Himeno, Hamaguchi, and Shiranami. Since this meant that the necessary seven members were present, they headed on into the café.

"Uh, it feels like you guys were having some kinda fight or something. What happened?" asked Watanabe.

Watanabe asked that question as soon as they were seated, having noticed that Kanzaki and Shibata were glaring at each other.

"Kanzaki was saying that I don't see the situation or something," said Shibata.

"Because you don't!" replied Kanzaki, eager to share his opinion on what the class should do in the year ahead. "Enough already, Shibata. Look at the reality. Hoshinomiya-sensei said something similar, didn't she?"

"You're the one not lookin' at reality or whatever," Shibata argued. "We still have a whole 'nother year. We just gotta do somethin' like what Horikita's class did, like how they got a bunch of Class Points over a year."

Watanabe and the others seemed to fully understand the nature of the fighting happening here: Kanzaki was recommending that they give up, while Shibata didn't want to.

"You have actually analyzed how they've managed to accumulate those Class Points?" Kanzaki asked. "There are many below-average students in their class, but they also have several students who possess outstanding abilities. Our class, on the other hand, doesn't have a student like Kouenji, who competed as an individual in the Uninhabited Island Exam and took first place on his own."

"Well, that's-"

"Nor do we have an Ayanokouji, the person who had completely shut Ichinose down during the End-of-Year Special Exam, even though she radiated confidence beforehand. There is absolutely no way we can win. Period," Kanzaki said, talking right over Shibata and continuing on as if he were releasing all of the pent-up frustration and anger that had been building up inside him until now over the spring vacation.

"W-wait, just hold on a sec, man. So, okay, sure, the thing about Kouenji, yeah, that might be true," Shibata conceded. "But Ayanokouji might've only won by sheer chance. We don't actually know what happened during the exam, after all."

"You're still talking like that even after we've gotten to this point. That's why this is hopeless!" shouted Kanzaki, unable to hide his irritation over Shibata's way of thinking and not allowing for any further rebuttal from him. "Our class is already sunk. In that case, we ought to shift our thinking to how many people we can have escape," added Kanzaki.

"H-hey, Kanzaki-kun, that's going a little too far!" exclaimed Amikura, unable to stop herself from interjecting.

"I'm not overstating anything. It's the truth," argued Kanzaki.

"Okay, but even if what you say's true, that we're like a sinking ship or whatever, then that's exactly why we should all be workin' together to bail out the water and make the ship steady again, bruh! All of us together, without a single person left behind!" exclaimed Shibata.

"Hey, Shibata-kun. Can we really manage something like that?" asked Himeno, speaking up against him, albeit reservedly.

"Huh?" blinked Shibata.

"I'm not saying it's impossible, but you know, getting to Class A from here, it won't be easy," said Himeno.

"Well, yeah, I know it's not easy," Shibata admitted. "That's exactly why we've gotta be more united as a class, though. If we keep thinkin' all negative like Kanzaki is, then we won't be able to turn anything around, even the small things that we could right now."

Come what may, Shibata was trying to think positively. In contrast, Kanzaki was trying to prepare for the worst in anything and everything. It was inevitable that the two of them wouldn't meet in the middle.

"Enough of this. This conversation is over," said Kanzaki, trying to end the discussion now that he'd reached his limit for dealing with positivity.

"What? You're done talkin'? I can keep goin'. I'm in the mood to

discuss this thing all the way through," said Shibata.

"There is no point in having a discussion when you won't accept any answer except for the one you want to hear," spat Kanzaki. "Your thoughtlessly happy-go-lucky attitude is on display here, in a bad way."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute! I'm not thoughtless. Actually, I'd say you're way too pessimistic, Kanzaki," replied Shibata.

"I'd rather you describe it as being realistic. In the first place, I—"

A shadow suddenly appeared between the two people who had been clashing over diametrically opposed opinions.

"Hey, you two. No fighting, okay?"

As the verbal skirmish was getting heated, the student that they had all been eagerly awaiting suddenly arrived. Even Shibata had to stop glaring at Kanzaki to let his jaw hang loose in surprise.

"Ichinose... You came," said Kanzaki, the only one who had been skeptical about whether she was really going to make an appearance.

"Are you okay, Honami-chan?" Shiranami asked immediately, looking like she was about to cry. As happy as she was, her concern took precedence.

"Yeah. I'm so sorry for worrying you, but I'm okay now," said Ichinose.

No matter how positive the words she uttered right now, it could've merely been Ichinose putting up a tough front. Her classmates had been apprehensive about that, but now that she was actually there, she seemed to be in genuinely good spirits. Shibata in particular, who felt Ichinose's hand on his shoulder, noticed that the sparkle in her eyes was just as brilliant as before, or perhaps even brighter.

"Y-you're okay, Ichinose," Shibata stammered, unable to help his blush as he caught wind of her perfume. "I'm so glad."

"I worried you, didn't I?" said Ichinose.

"Nah, not at all," he replied. "I mean, I believed you'd be fine, so...ha ha!"

Ichinose seemed different from before, somehow. She had a more mature vibe, which affected Shibata, who bashfully averted his eyes when she looked at him from up close.

Ichinose removed the hand that she had gently placed on

Shibata's shoulder and looked around at everyone.

"I'm truly sorry for not having given you all proper response all this time, everyone," she began.

"No, that's totally okay," Amikura assured her. "But...are you really all right now?"

At those words, Shiranami nodded her head emphatically to show her shared concern.

"I'm okay," Ichinose answered. "But, you know, I'd actually like to come out and have a proper talk with you all, about what's going on."

With a soft and gentle smile, Ichinose sat down in the empty seat between Amikura and Shiranami. Then, everyone's eyes were focused on Ichinose, without exception. They wondered whether her smile was only on the surface. They wondered how many of the wounds inflicted upon her during the End-of-Year Special Exam were still there. Finally, and most importantly, they wondered what was going to happen in the future.



Before Ichinose was absent due to a cold, she had been acting as though she was going to be stepping down as the leader of the class. Although Hoshinomiya had cut her off before she could officially step down, nobody had thought that it would have been strange if she had retired from the stage right then and there.

"H-hey, um, Honami-chan?" asked Amikura.

Before Ichinose could begin to speak, Amikura, unable to bear it any longer, decided to just come out and say what had been on her mind.

"Hm? What is it?" asked Ichinose.

"You're not...going to say that you're, like, going to drop out of school, are you?" she asked.

For her best friend Amikura, the matter of whether Ichinose would step down as class leader wasn't really a big deal. The responsibilities and pressures that weighed on Ichinose meant that if she had the desire to step down, that was her right, and Amikura couldn't impact her decision. What was important to Amikura was that Ichinose didn't come to hate this school. She was afraid that Ichinose might come forward and say that she was going to punish herself for her failure by voluntarily dropping out.

"You don't need to worry about that," Ichinose answered. "I just found out that Sakayanagi-san voluntarily withdrew from school, and because of that, her class is being penalized three hundred Class Points."

Ichinose hated the thought of causing trouble for the class more than anyone else, so her reply disputed Amikura's suggestion, reiterating that she would never choose an option that would harm them. Kanzaki, though, seeing how Ichinose was acting, tried to ascertain her true intentions.

"Then does that mean you would be willing to drop out of school of your own accord if there was some guarantee that our Class Points would not be penalized?" asked Kanzaki.

"K-Kanzaki-kun, what are you saying?!" Amikura cried out, angry with him for saying something that seemed only meant to hurt Ichinose's feelings.

"She's right, Kanzaki. There's gotta be a better way to phrase what

you just said," agreed Watanabe.

"Don't worry, Mako-chan. Even if there wasn't a penalty for voluntarily dropping out of school, I wouldn't give up that easily," said Ichinose.

That answer must have sincerely comforted Amikura, because it prompted her to pat her chest and let out a sigh of relief.

"So...does that mean you are prepared to accept expulsion if it was for the class's benefit, then? For example, say that we would get three hundred Class Points if you drop out, Ichinose. What would you do if we were offered such a choice?" asked Kanzaki.

If you thought about it for even a moment, he was presenting a scenario that was unlikely, and a decision that would be reckless even if it did come about.

"The conditions would be quite different in that scenario," Ichinose replied. "But if someone were to guarantee that everyone in our class would definitely graduate from Class A if I dropped out, then I wouldn't hesitate to make that choice. I'd absolutely drop out."

"N-no, you couldn't, Honami-chan!" wailed Amikura.

"I know," Ichinose assured her. "Anyway, it's fine. Honestly, we wouldn't be forced into a choice like that. Which is why I intend to fight together with all of you up until the moment we all graduate from Class A."

"So, can we take that to mean that your heart's doing kinda better now?" asked Shibata, sounding pleased as he leaned forward. "You're doin' good?"

"Yes. Because I've had time to think about lots of things, and I've finally gotten all of my problems sorted out. So, if you'll all still accept me as your leader, then I'll keep being there, with all of you, together."

"Of course we do, Honami-chan. I mean, you're the only one who could be the leader of our cla—"

BANG! Kanzaki brought his palm down against the table to halt the return to cheerful conversation.

"Whether you continue as leader, don't just go ahead and talk about what comes next already," he growled. "I'm sorry, but am I really supposed to believe that you've actually got back on your feet, Ichinose? What exactly has changed since yesterday, when you were moping around and holed up in your room? If you're simply putting up a tough front, then that's only doing a disservice to our class."

"Hey, Kan—"

Shibata angrily tried to tell Kanzaki to watch himself, but Ichinose calmly stepped in.

"It's true that every day cooped up in my room was hell," she said. "Every day. Because not only did our class take damage from losing the End-of-Year Special Exam, but it was my fault, and if I hadn't messed up then there might've been a way to win. I thought about how I wanted to quit school so many times, it was so painful and frustrating, and I even cried quite a few times. However..."

After pausing to take a breath, Ichinose turned to look at everyone, with Kanzaki at the center.

"Things are different now. I'm different. I've completely recovered," said Ichinose.

"You certainly look like you're in good spirits, sure," Kanzaki observed. "But what proof do you have?"

"I guess that means I have to tell you, huh?" said Ichinose.

"Of course. If you're insisting that you've made a full recovery, then there must be some kind of major catalyst for it," said Kanzaki.

Kanzaki pointed out that her wounds weren't ones that could have healed over that quickly, just from being left alone. If she were to say that time had healed her, then he was planning to take her to task over it, and tell her that it was a lie.

"That's true..." Ichinose conceded. "I guess it's because all of the doubts I had been dealing with have been resolved."

"The doubts you were dealing with?" asked Kanzaki.

"Yes," Ichinose confirmed. "Things like: How could I fight in the future? How can we make it to Class A without losing anyone? Is it even all right for me to be the leader of the class? Those doubts had been cleared away."

"...How?" asked Kanzaki.

"Well, that's because a certain someone saved me," she answered. "That's why."

A certain someone. When she put it like that, the first person to

come to mind for Kanzaki was none other than Ayanokouji. That was because Ayanokouji had defeated Ichinose in the End-of-Year Special Exam, and also because he could imagine it was something trivial, like Ichinose had a crush on Ayanokouji, who was worried about the class. That description was also why everyone other than Kanzaki thought she was referring to a teacher or another friend, rather than Ayanokouji.

"That's awesome. Who helped you?" Shibata asked with nothing but curiosity in his voice.

Ichinose looked at him with the warmest expression she'd worn so far that day, as though that question had been etched into her heart.

"Ayanokouji-kun," she replied.

As soon as Kanzaki heard the name that he'd been bracing for, he shot back at her without trying to hide his anger.

"Ayanokouji is a clear and obvious enemy!" Kanzaki snarled. "And you're saying that you were saved by the very opponent who defeated you in the End-of-Year Special Exam?"

"Yes. I was saved by Ayanokouji-kun," Ichinose repeated. "That's the undeniable truth."

Exhaling softly, Kanzaki calmed himself down so that his anger wouldn't take over. Ayanokouji had helped him out on several occasions as well, and Kanzaki even recognized him as someone that he could rely on when they were together. However, Ayanokouji had stood against their class as an obvious enemy during the End-of-Year Special Exam. He had defeated Ichinose and struck the class down into despair. Even if Kanzaki had some half-hearted cognizance of companionship, it wasn't going to lead to anything good. Kanzaki had come to learn that the hard way.

"Saved by Ayanokouji, huh?" Kanzaki said. "I hope that's a lie, but if it's not, that is a huge problem. Now I doubt that you were even really 'saved' at all."

Kanzaki was condemning Ichinose so thoroughly and completely that Shibata and the others couldn't even be angry with him, only exasperated.

"Look, Kanzaki, bruh," Shibata jumped in. "If Ichinose says that Ayanokouji saved her, let's just be grateful for that."

"You don't understand," Kanzaki dismissed his words entirely.

"You don't know how dangerous a man Ayanokouji is."

At this point, Kanzaki hesitated over whether to reveal all of the information he had. Namely, that Ayanokouji was the son of the respected Ayanokouji Atsuomi, and that Ayanokouji himself was highly skilled; it was just that he wasn't allowing those around him to see it. Right now, in detail—

"Kanzaki-kun."

"...What?" he asked after a brief silence.

"Before we discuss that, I was wondering if we could talk about something else for a minute," said Ichinose.

Kanzaki was momentarily thrown off by Ichinose's words, which seemed to anticipate his thoughts. It wasn't like she was intimidating him or threatening him at all. It was just that her tone of voice and her expression somehow made him speechless, even if they weren't any different from her usual.

"It was because of my own weakness that I lost the End-of-Year Special Exam. Because, by the nature of the exam, I had to fight equally against my opponent, no matter who they were," said Ichinose, presenting her friends with a summary of her reflections since the exam had ended. "I lost to Ayanokouji-kun because I lost sight of the essence of competition. I want you all to know what kind of state of mind I was in at the time."

She tried to find the words to express something that she hadn't said until now, not even to herself.

"I... Since who knows when, I've been in love with Ayanokouji-kun," said Ichinose.

Ichinose stated her feelings for her classmates to hear, without blushing and without panicking. Shibata was the most surprised of all, his mouth hanging open silently. Ichinose continued, without paying any mind to that or any other reactions.

"At the time, I believed that Ayanokouji-kun was thinking about me, without any doubt. However, as soon as the exam started, those shallow, foolish assumptions of mine were shattered," she said.

Ayanokouji had proposed to Ichinose that they used their traitor rights, so that no one would be expelled from their classes. By taking advantage of that, Ayanokouji had made Ichinose party to Maezono's

expulsion. Ichinose's classmates listened expectantly as they heard for the very first time about the battle between representatives. At the same time, they were hearing about Ayanokouji's true nature, which Kanzaki had wanted them to know.

An unassuming student who didn't stand out very much. That was a fabrication. He was a student who was extremely calm and composed, and who could make precise judgments under pressure. Ichinose had wanted everyone to hear about Ayanokouji's greatness from her, rather than from Kanzaki.

"Is Ayanokouji-kun...really so incredible of a student?" asked Himeno haltingly.

At that question, Ichinose nodded with a happy squint in her eyes, as though one of her own was being praised. Himeno too had sensed that Ayanokouji was no ordinary student, but she couldn't fully grasp it yet, and there was a big gap in understanding.

"I think that it was only after the exam that I really, truly understood him myself," said Ichinose. "While it's not like there was only one factor that made it possible for Horikita-san's class to move up to Class A, I think it was something that they definitely wouldn't have accomplished without Ayanokouji-kun."

That is to say, it wasn't Horikita's class. It was Ayanokouji's class. What she said practically amounted to saying those exact words.

"W-whoa, uh, yeah, man," Shibata stammered. "For real, so Ayanokouji is that amazing of a dude, huh? Uh, well...I never really had that much contact with the guy, so I guess I never really thought too much 'bout it. Or like, uh, I thought, uh, that, like, your feelings were more like respect for the guy rather than you liking him, though."

In a bit of a panic, Shibata tried to refute what Ichinose said, suggesting that she simply wasn't using the right choice of words in expressing her thoughts, or that it was a misunderstanding.

"I do have respect for him too, of course," Ichinose agreed. "But more than that, I love Ayanokouji-kun."

Even though Ichinose answered Shibata proudly and openly, she felt herself flush. That was not because her contact with Ayanokouji had been physical, but rather because for a moment, she had been able to touch the surface of Ayanokouji's heart, which perhaps even Karuizawa hadn't been able to see.

"Whoa, that's incredible... I mean, for you of all people to say all that, Ichinose, it's... Man, how did *that* happen?" said Watanabe, astonished.

Watanabe couldn't imagine that her feelings were unreciprocated if she was announcing it like this, and cast a fleeting glance at his own crush, Amikura. Meanwhile, Amikura was happy to see that Ichinose had grown to the point where she could clearly state that she loved someone, and came to the conclusion that something must have happened in the process of Ichinose asking Ayanokouji for advice. Maybe they were in a relationship now, maybe even beyond what she was imagining.

"Wait, hold on though. Isn't..." Shibata hesitated as he tried to line his words up. "Uh...doesn't Ayanokouji already got a girlfriend?"

"Shibata-kun... Look, um, it's kinda hard for me to tell you this, but..." intervened Amikura, not wanting to dash his hopes, but deciding that it would be best to come out and say it immediately. "I heard that Ayanokouji-kun and Karuizawa-san broke up recently."

Shibata flopped down on the desk and started twitching slightly.

"At any rate, you should all understand things well enough now. That there's no chance for us to win anymore," declared Kanzaki. He'd been quietly listening until this point, even when the comments turned more toward gossip, but now it felt like he had a chance to make his classmates accept a different strategy. He had to change the course of the conversation to make them comply with an overall change of course for the class. "Now is precisely the time we should be moving in the direction of collecting Private Points."

He wanted them to give up on Class A as a whole, and shift completely toward accumulating Private Points. Ichinose had once released the funds that she had been pooling on behalf of her classmates, but they had all begun saving again. If they were to increase the percentage of how much they put into their savings to the uppermost limit and all exhibited self-restraint, they could afford a few tickets to Class A.

"So you really think it'd be better for us to just throw away the idea of winning, Kanzaki?" asked Watanabe.

"Sorry, but I wasn't asking you for your opinion right now, Watanabe." said Kanzaki, having asserted that an optimistic strategy would only delay the inevitable here. "Answer me, Ichinose."

"It's certainly true that if it's difficult to reach Class A, relying on Private Points is the proper way to do it," Ichinose replied. "I don't think it's a bad idea. In fact, I would even bet that some of the former Class A students have been considering that option several times now."

When we become third-years, it'll be a one-on-one battle between Horikita's class and Ryuuen's class. More and more students were beginning to accept this situation.

"However, I think that this class of ours can still fight. We can still aim for Class A," added Ichinose.

"That's impossible," argued Kanzaki. "I cannot imagine that you've actually done the job of analyzing the competition, in any way."

"Hey, come on, Kanzaki. Even if it'll be tough to catch up like you've been saying, it's not a terrible thing for us to shoot for it," Watanabe piped up again despite Kanzaki shutting him out, perhaps inspired by Ichinose's apparent certainty. "It can make all the difference for your motivation if you got a goal that you can really go for with everything you've got, you know?"

"That would be inefficient," countered Kanzaki, unable to accept an argument without evidence. "You're certainly free to aim, and you're free to aspire, but that freedom naturally comes at a price."

"I don't get it. What price is there?" asked Watanabe.

"I can think of many ways in which there would be a price," Kanzaki answered. "For example, if we needed to increase our assets in order to win an exam, spending Private Points would be the key to victory in that scenario. It's not just limited to that kind of thing either. It could be to gather information or to avoid some kind of penalty. Or, what if a student in our class was in danger of being expelled? Would you have another twenty million points ready to go every time something like that happened?"

He was proposing a strategy of not wasting any Private Points, of reducing their consumption of points by ignoring the majority of the competition.

"Wait, not only are you giving up on Class A, but you're even abandoning your friends?!" exclaimed Watanabe.

"It's necessary for everyone in the class to have that approach, not

just me," said Kanzaki.

"Hold on, everyone, that's..." sputtered Watanabe.

Kanzaki, after having gotten Watanabe to quiet down, took the opportunity to stay on the attack.

"Himeno, Hamaguchi," Kanzaki addressed them directly, hoping to gain allies. "What do you think?"

"Well..." said Hamaguchi, hesitating. "To be honest, I also feel that everyone should give the idea some consideration, yeah."

"Me too, I think...saving Private Points isn't a bad idea at all," Himeno added.

"So, how about that?" said Kanzaki. "I'm not the only one. There are at least some students in our class who feel the same way."

"Wait, hold up. Are you guys all insane or something?" Shibata pulled his face up off of the desk and looked around. His eyes were wet at the corners, but he just couldn't let Kanzaki's suggested approach win out without any resistance. "Don't talk stupid. You sayin' that we sacrifice our friends so that one or two people can transfer to Class A and reach the goal? No way, bruh. Absolutely not. Our plan for the whole class winnin' or losin' together should *not* be changed. No way."

"I think so too," said Ichinose.

"Y-yeah...Ichinose..." replied Shibata.

Even though she was speaking up in agreement, seeing her warm smile made Shibata feel like his heart was being gouged out all over again, and so he flopped back down on his desk.

"Enough already," spat Kanzaki. "That's all just wishful thinking."

"You're right, it certainly is wishful thinking," said Ichinose without hesitation. "We have been able to fight our way to this point without anyone getting expelled. That is undeniably a strength, but we can't deny the fact that it's come at a cost as well, as we've continued to lose Class Points in exchange. Regardless, that wishful thinking may also bear fruit."

Ichinose answered with confidence, but of course, Kanzaki saw absolutely nothing of her clear vision. To him, it sounded simply like she was talking hypothetically, about her dreams and ideals.

"Once again, I want us to graduate from Class A together, without

losing anyone," said Ichinose.

"You do realize that's impossible, don't you?" said Kanzaki.

"No," Ichinose replied firmly. "It's not impossible."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot trust you whatsoever," said Kanzaki. "Yes, I may recognize that you have recovered mentally from the exam, but there is absolutely no way I could be convinced by such a frivolous, careless statement, that we can make it to Class A from here."

"Yes, I suppose not. I need to stop thinking that I'll just resolve it with words, just by saying things like 'Hey, it's okay.' It is true that over these past two years, we've fallen from Class B to Class D, after all," said Ichinose with a nod at Kanzaki to acknowledge that his pointed remark still had a reasonable point. "Regardless, I was hoping that I could ask you to hold on until spring vacation is over."

"Can I interpret that as meaning that you'll prove it to me then?" said Kanzaki.

"Yes. If you're not satisfied with the answer at that time, then I will proactively consider your proposal, Kanzaki-kun," said Ichinose.

If Ichinose agreed to lean toward accumulating Private Points, rather than trying to win in the class rankings, then even the classmates that disagreed with the method would likely follow. Just a few more days. Time was precious, but Kanzaki decided that it was worth it just for her to accept his conditions.

"You will stand by that statement, right?" he asked.

"I will. I have neither the qualifications nor the right to say that I will absolutely make us graduate from Class A without fail, but I promise. I promise that I will lift the class up to a state where we can compete for Class A," said Ichinose.

Ichinose looked to her gathered classmates for confirmation. Though they were all puzzled, they nodded to indicate that they would hold off on any conclusions for the moment. From that point on, Ichinose really was her usual self, sounding happy at times and sad at times, as she told them about the events of the past two weeks or so.

Shibata wanted to ask about Ayanokouji the whole time, but in the end, he couldn't say a single word about it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he found it hard to ask about something so heavy in front of the other students. He was sure that nothing had really happened between them yet, and held onto that hope as he decided to wait for his moment.

The warm, gentle times of Ichinose's class had returned. Though Kanzaki was looking at her coldly, he endured it because he had agreed to wait a few days. Then, when he got up from his seat to go use the restroom, Ichinose followed after him.

"Kanzaki-kun?" she asked.

"...What?"

"Don't you think you have something to report to me?" she asked.

"Report?" he repeated as he stopped to turn around and eye her suspiciously, unsure what she was talking about.

"I believe that I am responsible for the results of the End-of-Year Special Exam," said Ichinose. "But, Kanzaki-kun, do you have any explanation for what happened with you? About whether you fought in a way that was appropriate, as a representative?"

"You're saying that there was a problem with the way I fought?" Kanzaki asked. "I fought hard against Horikita, and I lost. It's frustrating, but that's the truth."

"Did you decide before the exam that you were going to beg your opponent to hand over the win?" she asked.

"Uh..." he stammered.

"You had given up on winning from the start, Kanzaki-kun," Ichinose continued. "I wish you would have at least talked to me."

"Well, that's... Did you hear about that from Horikita? Or perhaps
__"

"It's not important who I heard it from," replied Ichinose, cutting him off.

"N-no, I suppose not. It's just...that was the only plan I could come up with to win. I didn't care about how it looked. I had no other choice. At the time, I just decided that it was what I had to do, and..."

He had been making eye contact as he tried to explain himself with dignity, but his breath caught in his throat; he was choking. She looked so different from how she had even mere moments earlier, when she had been listening to what her classmates had to say.

"I did ask them to hand over the win... If word got out about that, out in front of Shibata and the other students, then it would definitely lower morale. That's why I didn't say anything," said Kanzaki desperately, trying to make excuses.

"Because we couldn't beat Ayanokouji-kun. Because that was the conclusion you reached, right?" said Ichinose.

"Well, that's—"

Her strong gaze took a tight hold of Kanzaki's true feelings, his conscience.

"I understand that anxiety," said Ichinose. "I also understand the pain of not having anyone who understands. It's okay now, though."

What do you mean, okay? Kanzaki didn't have the courage to voice that question.

"Forgive me," he said instead. "It is true that I fought in a way that was not commendable."

"If you're ever struggling, you can come talk to me any time. I'll stand by you when you're feeling discouraged," said Ichinose.

They were kind words, but Kanzaki only felt a chill run up his spine. That was because he was hearing them as a warning, telling him to never do anything selfish again from here on out. Ichinose turned around and then went back to their classmates, and when she sat down in her seat, the look on her face was no different from usual.

"Was that...really Ichinose...?" wondered Kanzaki.

She was different from when she appeared wasted away and exhausted, right after the exam ended, but also different from when she exhibited moments of confidence before an exam. There was something odd, something he couldn't quite grasp.

Chapter 11: Goals

It was monday at last, marking the start of a new semester, the first of our final year. Horikita and I were the first to arrive in the classroom of Class 2-B, where students clad in their uniforms were beginning to gather. Apparently, we were allowed to use the classroom for just one hour, on the condition that we were strictly forbidden to dirty the room or leave any garbage. There were thirty-nine seats in the room.

The room had been rearranged to meet the specifications of the new Class 2-B, which was short by one student due to Yagami's expulsion. The students were told to take care of their own drinks, but it seemed that Sudou had borrowed a tank-shaped thermal container called a 'water cooler' from his basketball club, and was freely offering the tea it contained. Several girls also brought pots, in which they prepared hot cocoa, cold black tea, and other drinks for everyone, out of the goodness of their hearts.

Soon afterward, I saw Satou with some other girls who were close with Karuizawa, but she didn't make her way over to me, even after we made eye contact. I figured that meant "I'm not going to rain on your parade during a victory celebration." However, it was clear that we had taken a significant step back in regards to our relationship. That was just how much she cared about her friend, and how much they shared their feelings. I couldn't disapprove of such an inclination.

Aside from her, some of my other classmates were acting as though they were concerned about me. They were getting a strange feeling from me—like something was off—that they had never noticed until now. They were the ones who had gotten a glimpse of my true abilities. Eventually, the scheduled start time arrived, and in the end, a total of thirty-five people had gathered. Karuizawa and Kouenji did not show up. The victory celebration was about to begin, with or without all of our classmates present.

"It looks like Karuizawa-san isn't going to attend, but...she's really the one you dumped you, right?" asked Horikita.

She must have suspected that if Karuizawa had been the one to do the dumping, then she should have been attending without a care. She must have also noticed that Satou and the others were looking at me somewhat coldly.

"Maybe she just had plans, or she's not feeling well?" I replied.

"Yeah," said Horikita, "That could be true."

Yousuke, who had been paying attention to me, approached once he heard Karuizawa's name mentioned.

"Um, excuse me, but could I have a minute?" Yousuke asked. "About the situation with Karuizawa-san, well...I heard about it."

Horikita immediately stepped back and silently, but physically, demonstrated that her stance was to not get in the way of our conversation.

"I'm sorry for not measuring up to your expectations after all the help you've given me, Yousuke," I told him.

"There's nothing for you to apologize for. It's a shame that your relationship ended, but for this issue, well, there's pretty much nothing that can be done," he assured me. Since Horikita was right there listening, he spoke as though he had also been dumped by Karuizawa, even though it had just been camouflage. "I mean, I can't really speak up about it myself, either."

"Have you heard anything about how she's doing?" I asked.

"I've heard that Satou-san invited her out, but I guess that must've been a no-go. I don't know what I can do for Karuizawa-san in the future, but I intend to lend a helping hand whenever she's in trouble. And that doesn't just go for Karuizawa-san, either. I'll take care of my classmates so that we can all walk forward, without hesitation. So don't worry," said Yousuke.

Even if we were to ignore the matter of Karuizawa, I was sure that Yousuke must've had a grudge or two he wanted to bring up with me right here. The fact that he wasn't pleased with my having gotten Maezono expelled was plain as day in his words. However, he already knew that he couldn't just complain, which was why he made up his mind to protect the class once again. *So don't worry*. Yousuke included his own condition when he said that.

"You too, Ayanokouji-kun. If you're ever having any doubts, I

want you to come talk to me," he said.

"Horikita said something similar to me," I replied. "Thanks, Yousuke."

"Okay. Well, I'm going to go chat with everyone else for a bit," said Yousuke, before flashing a smile that wasn't quite his usual one, and heading off.

"He really does understand too," said Horikita. "He knows the choice you made was the correct one."

"There's no need for anyone to force themselves to accept it as the correct choice, though, is there?" I asked. "It's just that the world doesn't spin on pretty words alone. Not to mention, people don't mature that easily. There's no clear solution, so it's okay for people to worry about it as much as they want."

In this class, they should desperately, frantically struggle to find an answer that's even closer to the correct one.

"You're really strong," remarked Horikita.

"I'm simply blunt," I replied. "I don't mind being condemned, but I don't care if I'm not being praised either."

It wasn't necessary for me to have my accomplishments recognized by others. I was the one who analyzed and understood the person known as "me" better than anyone else could.

"I suppose..." she conceded. "But I am grateful to you. I wanted to make sure that I said that."

"Even though I had gotten Maezono expelled?" I asked.

"It was an exam where we couldn't have won if you hadn't done that. Besides, in the end, it's not your problem, it's mine. I need to grow up more. I need to be able to make more choices for myself. I have to become strong enough to win without getting anyone else expelled," said Horikita, pausing for a moment as a bitter smile appeared on her face, before she added one more thought. "I keep thinking that way, but it just doesn't seem to work out very well."

"Well, yeah," I replied. "Even if someone says that years have already gone by, that's only a fraction of our lives. You haven't had enough time to get good enough to make everything go well yet."

"Yeah, I suppose so," she said, and then headed over to the

podium as her classmates called her over.

11.1

The victory party had just begun, and it was already almost time for it to end. I watched the final wave of excitement from the back of the classroom, just a short distance away. Then Ayanokouji-kun came over and handed me a paper cup, with the sweet smell of cocoa wafting from it.

"Thanks," I said.

Then, we stood side by side and observed our classmates. Right now, everyone in class was talking about their respective goals for the coming year, and at that particular moment, it was Ike-kun's turn to speak. I had thought he was going to do something stupid again to get attention, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"Well, I...um. I thought about this for a long time over spring break. I was wondering about Maezono, well, y'know, if she'll be able to handle everything okay after being expelled."

"Hey, Kanji, are you really plannin' on standing there and saying stuff that's gonna be a downer?" asked Sudou-kun, warning Ike-kun not to drag that discussion up again, in his own way.

"No, dude, that's not it," Ike-kun shook his head as he continued. "It's just that, well, it just, like, came outta nowhere, y'know? Plus it's like, it coulda happened to anyone of us, not just Maezono. It wouldn't be surprisin' if one of us were next. I realized that goin' through your day-to-day like nothin' matters, well, that's wrong."

"Well, yeah, it is important to be prepared for anything," said Yukimura-kun, speaking up to agree with Ike-kun.

"I've never really given any, like, serious thought to my future path. Not even once," said Ike-kun.

At the end of the day, all the fuss over getting expelled was because one's entire future was at stake. We should always look ahead and act accordingly, so that even if we were tossed out of school tomorrow, we would be okay. It seemed like Ike-kun had realized just

how important that was.

"It's not easy to grow into the sort of person who can do the things that need to be done," Yukimura said to him, sounding like a teacher offering advice to a student. "But realizing that is the first step toward becoming that person. Don't forget it."

After that, students took turns stepping up to the podium to speak, one after another.

"It looks like a lot of students have matured a little, like we saw with Ike when he stepped up to speak," remarked Ayanokouji-kun.

"Yes, that's true," I replied. "It's a world of difference compared to when he first started here."

"What's your goal?" he asked.

"Me? I..." I began.

I felt like if I gave it serious thought, I might've hesitated, so I decided to just give in to spontaneity.

"To believe in myself and to believe in my classmates, I think. If I do that, then I'm absolutely certain that we can graduate from Class A," I declared.

A small declaration of resolve. It was a statement that I was sure would come back to torment me in the future. Even so, I wanted to be prepared to sever Ayanokouji-kun's path of retreat by making sure that he heard it.

"A good goal," was his reply.

"Y-you think so? I mean, I would say that it's an incredibly obvious one, though..." I answered.

"Sure, but it's often unexpectedly difficult to actually do the obvious thing that needs to be done," he answered.

"Yeah... You're right."

To do the obvious thing that needed to be done was rarely a simple task. That was true.

"What's your goal?" I asked.

"I'm not telling you now," he answered.

"Huh? Wait, hold on, that's not fair!" I exclaimed.

Annoyed by the fact that I was the only one who was forced to say

something, I pressed up against Ayanokouji-kun. His face was so close that I felt somehow embarrassed, and I hurriedly pulled away to put some distance between us again.

"Well...it's fine. In that case, you can tell me another time," I added.

"Another time, huh?" he answered.

I let my gaze wander to the window in order to escape from his cocky stare. There were many, many things I didn't like about him, but Ayanokouji-kun's presence was truly reassuring. It was an undeniable fact that he was a source of support for me.

After looking at the scenery outside and calming down, I remembered that I had one more goal. Something welled up within me, and I spontaneously followed up, appending that goal to the simple one I had already stated.



"One more year to go. Once again, I want to become a classmate that you will recognize," I added. "I'm not saying that I want you to help me with everything. I just want you to stand by me the whole time, and watch—"

While feeling self-conscious of my cheeks heating up, I turned to look at Ayanokouji-kun standing next to me. However, despite having been there only moments ago, Ayanokouji-kun...had disappeared.

"...Ayanokouji-kun?"

Even when I looked around the classroom, I didn't see him anywhere. Normally, I would've just assumed that he had gone to the restroom, or something. Yet strangely enough, I felt an odd sensation, something sad and painful.

Even by the time the end of the victory party was announced, he hadn't come back to the classroom.



Chapter 12: The Curtain Rises Once Again

ONCE THE OPENING CEREMONY had finished, the teachers gathered in the faculty office for a brief conference before making their way to their classrooms, where their students would be waiting for them.

"Let's walk together part of the way, Sae-chan."

It was the first time that Hoshinomiya had approached Chabashira since they met in Mashima's room during spring vacation. She even left the faculty office slightly ahead of the other teachers.

"S-sure," replied Chabashira, clutching her tablet and hurrying to follow after her.

"I'm sure you're wondering what I'm going to do from here on," said Hoshinomiya.

"Obviously," replied Chabashira. "Does that mean you've given it some thought, and you'll tell me, then...?"

"Of course. I'm not changing," Hoshinomiya stated. "I will never allow you to graduate from Class A, Sae-chan."

Ayanokouji isn't just a simple student. Perhaps he will come up with a solution. While Chabashira had held onto such faint hopes, they turned out to be mere hopes after all. Well, she supposed that it was only natural that he couldn't do anything. This wasn't a problem between students. It had escalated past that and was a problem between teachers. That's what she thought.

"Then, does that seriously mean you're going to sully your hands by cheating?" asked Chabashira.

"Oh, that reminds me. Yeah, I suppose there is that," Hoshinomiya mused. "Wait a second. I'll simply come straight out and tell you."

Chabashira braced herself. If Hoshinomiya said that she was going to resort to that, Chabashira was going to have to strike first and report her to the school. She was determined to put a stop to it before anything happened.

"About what I said before, that I would stop you from reaching

Class A, even if it meant cheating: I take that all back," said Hoshinomiya.

Contrary to what Chabashira had been bracing for, Hoshinomiya said something that made it sound like she was reformed.

"I-is that really true? You must be lying just because I'm standing here," snapped Chabashira.

"It's understandable that you would doubt me, but it's the truth. I promise," she said.

Promise. Hoshinomiya made that declaration firmly. However, Chabashira was more surprised and upset than she was happy to hear it.

"Does that..." Chabashira hesitated. "Does that mean you're going to try to coerce me into something, in exchange?"

"No way," answered Hoshinomiya. "You should continue facing forward seriously, together with everyone in your class, just as you have been until now. There is no way I would impose any kind of conditions on you."

"But-"

"I know what you're getting at. 'But why did you change your mind?' Right?" asked Hoshinomiya.

Chabashira nodded deeply to confirm a perfectly natural question.

"Ayanokouji-kun persuaded me," said Hoshinomiya. "I was convinced, and I accepted."

"Ayanokouji did...?" Chabashira wondered. "Is that really true?"

"It's true," Hoshinomiya confirmed. "He really is an incredible student. Not only does he easily influence who wins and loses between the classes, but he even manipulates my feelings, which gradually turned into a deep-seated grudge. He really is like the joker, huh?"

In the midst of a conversation that kept throwing her off-balance, Chabashira couldn't help but think of the fact that Hoshinomiya had previously made the same comparison; of Ayanokouji to a joker, the deck's wild card.

"You're wondering how he persuaded me, right?" prompted Hoshinomiya.

"Yeah," said Chabashira. "To be honest, I'm not sure that I believe it."

"No, I suppose not," Hoshinomiya answered. "But that's fine. I think that you'll soon realize that it's the truth, Sae-chan."

In a brief time, the two of them were walking up the steps and approaching the corridor where the third-year classrooms were located.

"Because..." began Hoshinomiya.

As they climbed the last step and then turned the corner, the hallway opened into view, and Hoshinomiya flashed the cruelest possible smile at Chabashira.

"Because your hand no longer has the joker that you need to win, Sae-chan."

"I don't have the joker...? What does that...?" sputtered Chabashira as she tried to understand what Hoshinomiya was getting at.

"That's right," Hoshinomiya continued. "And if the joker were added to my hand, the tide of the battle would change greatly once more. If that happens, even I would have a chance to win, wouldn't I? So then, for the next year, let's fight fair and square."

Hoshinomiya had a fearless grin on her face as she placed her hand on the first door in the hall, the door to the room for Class 3-D.

"Go on, then. Why don't you go to your own classroom and see for yourself?" urged Hoshinomiya.

"See for myself?" Chabashira asked. "Chie, what in the world are you talking about?"

Doubt. Then, immediately, a thought that Chabashira would never normally have flashed through her mind.

"Ah ha ha. I can't wait to see that look on your face change into one of despair," said Hoshinomiya as she entered her own classroom, then slammed the door forcefully behind her.

It couldn't possibly be, thought Chabashira. With a scenario that should've been less than 1 percent likely filling her thoughts, Chabashira reached the classroom that was furthest along the hallway and was greeted by a shock that made her want to start running. The nameplate of the room, which said 3-A, was something she had been dreaming of. She hadn't dreamt of a faculty member running up to her

in a frenzy.

"Chabashira-sensei, it's just been decided, literally, as of just now, that a student of your class will be transferring!"

The faculty member continued to explain things after that, but the words barely reached Chabashira's ears.

12.1

The homeroom instructor for this class was stopped by a faculty member just as she was about to enter the classroom. She looked at me as I stood next to the faculty member and was astonished when she heard the details. After we each finished reconciling our perception of each other, the two of us entered the classroom together.

After the opening ceremony, it would normally be time to begin homeroom. Students who had gone on waiting, only to be disappointed. Unfamiliar sights. A nervous, almost bitter smile appeared on the face of a student. A student who looked at me with a stern expression, sizing me up. A student welcoming me, smiling at me. A classroom that smelled somehow new yet different.

Though some students were looking at me like they found something peculiar, no one was really taken aback. That was because they had been told in advance that I would be appearing at this time and place. Only the homeroom teacher, who had not heard the details, had yet to fully accept it.

"I know that we've just had the opening ceremony, but allow me to introduce myself: I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, and I just transferred to this class by using twenty million Private Points," I said. "Of course, I cannot replace Sakayanagi, who has voluntarily withdrawn from school. However, if all of you, my new classmates, still have the will to fight, then I am confident that I can help in breaking us out of this situation, even after the major setback this class has suffered."

All the Private Points I had available were Private Points that Hashimoto had been saving for a transfer. Then the remaining number of needed Private Points was raised equally by all the members of this class with their consent, which brought the total up to twenty million. Thanks to that, my transfer to this class was made a reality. With this class of highly capable students, I figured they would do the work for me, without any extra effort on my part, in controlling the board in numerous ways. The scramble for Class A, which I had originally envisioned as all four classes locked in equal rivalry in our third year—in the truest sense, this might not have been the ideal setup for that.

Nevertheless, the preparations were now complete. In this new class, my final year was beginning.

Postscript

Whew, It just got colder all of the sudden once we got into November. Hey all, Kinugasa here. So, my son is in a huge Mario craze right now. He was super enthusiastic about dressing up as a red Koopa Troopa for Halloween, and even when he's watching TV, he's like, Mario's so awesome, Mario's cool, Mario this, Mario that. If he likes Mario that much, as a parent, I really want to do my best to take him to USJ someday, but I wonder if I can really make that happen...

As for my condition and how things have been going with me recently with my hernia, I feel like I've recovered about 40 percent compared to when I was at my worst. I can't pump out work in succession for a prolonged period like I used to when I was healthy, but since I'm starting to be able to push myself a little more, I hope that I'll have an even better report for you all next time.

From here, the story will continue into the year three arc. This installment was a spring vacation episode, so I think that, yeah, it was probably a happy and peaceful episode for everybody. Oops. That was nothing more than my personal impressions, so please do not come to me with complaints if the reality is different. As for the content, well, as I'm sure you've seen for yourself, the year two arc ends with this volume. There were some parts that were said to be redundant, and not worth including in the installment, and there were some scenes I had no choice but to, reluctantly, and with a heavy heart, leave out due to page count concerns. Now, I wouldn't go so far as to say something like "It's not necessary for you to read it at all, but it will deepen your understanding of the work if you do," but I feel like it'd be a shame not to let that cut content ever see the light of day, so I hope that I'll get the opportunity to publish a short story about other stuff that happened during spring vacation, where I can be like "Hey, this happened here," and stuff.

At any rate, I just wanted to say once again: Thank you everyone for sticking with me all the way to the end of the year two arc! The year three arc will be starting soon, so I hope you keep on reading! I think that, with the year three arc, the series will be returning to its roots, with the main focus being on the battle between classes of the same

grade, like in the year one arc. Since the positions have changed significantly, even though the stage is the same, I sincerely hope that I will be able to present you with a fresh story once again, and I humbly hope that you will continue to stick with me until the conclusion.

Also, an official *Classroom* guidebook is being released. It would make me happy if you would pick up a copy, as it'll be an excellent primer to prepare you for the year three arc, looking back on the series thus far.

Well, then, everyone, I hope to see you again around March. See you!



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